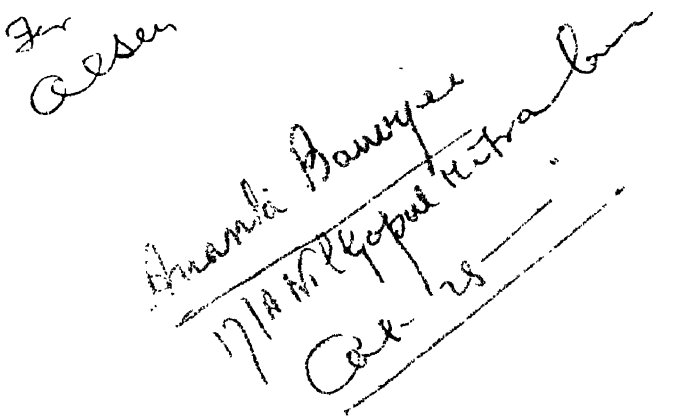


NOVELS BY

MAY CHRISTIE



The Forbidden Love
The Whirlwind Lover
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The Adventures of Helene
The Rebel Bride
The Garden of Desire
The Disturbing Kiss
The Confessions of Anne
The Girl in the Corner Flat

HODDER AND
STOUGHTON
Ltd., London.



HEARTS AFIRE

A NOVEL

BY

MAY CHRISTIE

Author of "The Garden of Desire," etc.



HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

Made and Printed in Great Britain. Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

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Chapter I — *Prince Charming*

PRUDENCE in the apple-orchard, feeding her chickens in the enchantment of an April morning and beneath a cloudless sky, dreamt of romance, young love and happiness.

Prudence was pretty. In the faded gingham gown that clung about her young. lithe figure, she was as tinglingly alive and spring-like as the slender trees that swayed about her, dipped in their first gay green.

"If only *something* would just happen!" Over the hedge that enclosed the apple-orchard in a little green universe of its own, she could glimpse the winding ribbon of road that led to strange, exciting worlds outside her ken. "If only——"

A scented breeze blew the dark curls about her face, and brought a lovelier rose-tinge to her rounded cheeks. It brought, too, longings—vague and indefinable—sweet as the perfume of the spring, full of the restless urge of it, rising to the head just as the sap was rising in the trees, and filling one with wonderment and exultation.

Oh! it was good to be alive! And yet--and yet—all this riot of young beauty must mean something, lead to something. . . .

Father and mother were darlings, but they did not understand. Not even love could bridge the *gulf* that

divided one generation from the next! They were 'afraid' for Prudence. They 'wanted the best' for the beloved child of that late marriage.

"Indeed, they'd like to wrap me up in cotton-wool!" Prudence confided half petulantly, half condoningly to her friend Janet Mercer, who was twenty-eight, and sensible, and independent, and strong-minded.

Janet Mercer vaguely understood. She was that rare creature, a woman who could see both sides unprejudiced, although she did believe that girls should have careers and freedom. She was plain and downright, and she called a spade a spade in a way that sometimes startled unsophisticated Prudence.

She was rather down on men, too, even though she had a sweetheart of her own. But then, Janet was a nurse, and nurses were notoriously disillusioned.

"You're born to be taken in, you little goosey!" she had rallied Prudence more than once, affectionately. "I don't blame your father and mother for wrapping you up and handling you as carefully as I do my precious Tanagra statuette. You're an *objet d'art*, and rough winds and clumsy fingers shouldn't touch you."

"Such nonsense, Janet! I want life, and fun, and——"

"A sweetheart?" supplemented Janet disconcertingly. "Cheer up, my child. Men—whole shoals of men—will tumble down like ninepins at the very sight of you."

Prudence's pretty eyes had widened at this news.

"Oh no. I'm not clever like you, Janet. I can't say witty things."

Janet had chuckled rather mirthlessly at that.

"My tongue's not a magnet, dearie, it's a razor. Men 'ud like me better if I cut it out. It's *listeners* they want, and flattery, and a dash of honey, and a pretty face like yours. Why, child, don't you know that men—most men—just *hate* a clever woman? She's an anomaly of nature, and a reflection on themselves. She shows 'em up too clearly for their peace of mind."

"Well, I'm not clever. And, anyhow, I don't ever have the chance to meet a man," Prudence had sighed.

Janet had stared at the younger girl for a moment, then had said, with a flash of intuition:

"It isn't just your good looks, it's the sheer femininity of you that would always charm—the 'something' that one can't define. If a woman's got it, she's got everything, and even her beauty isn't necessary to her. If she hasn't got it, then she's just a looker-on at the great game of——"

"Life?" suggested Prudence, interest aroused.

"Love, my child. And love is life," said the usually prosaic Janet, with an odd little tremor at her usually firm lips.

"Her affair with Will Ogilvie is going badly," thought sympathetic Prudence, longing to say the right thing, but with innate delicacy afraid to intrude on the other's secret.

To-day, as she fed her fluffy chickens, the girl's thoughts were roaming far afield. In the sweet April sunlight the countryside lay very still and silent, save for the occasional crowing of a rooster, or the song of mating birds.

Then, down the winding ribbon of road that led into this little green world there came the clopety-clop of horse's hoofs. Nearer and nearer. Metal ringing on

the road. Prudence wheeled round, her faded sunbonnet falling backward from her curls to dangle by the strings, and her young face bright with interest. Nearer and nearer . . . here now . . . over the hedge she could see his silhouette. . .

The rider was young and fair and slender. She noticed that at once. Didn't the sun, streaming on his hatless head, turn that polished hair of his to molten gold until he looked like—" like a Norse king or a sun-god ! " thought romantic Prudence, and, in an access of shyness, turned her back upon the road.

With a great clatter he wheeled up his horse.

" I say, there ! Hi ! Can you direct me to Wyndham Towers ? " The voice was young, musical, and rather arrogant. " I've lost my way in these infernal lanes and by-paths. It's a regular Chinese puzzle, hereabouts."

With pretty face as pink as drifted blossom, Prudence started over towards the hedge.

" It's the third turning after the next milestone along this road. Then keep straight on till you come to the west lodge gates."

" Thanks most awfully." The imperious note had vanished at sight of the girl's young beauty, yet the eyes still held their arrogance despite the amused interest they contained. Then, his teeth a strong flash of white, he added, gaily :

" Quite a rustic picture, isn't it ? Phœbe in the apple-orchard with her chickens ! "

The girl blushed deeper, half in shyness, half resentment.

" He takes me for a dairymaid," thought she. (Oh, for Janet Mercer's adroit power of handling situations, conversations, men !)

"Come, don't be timid. Anyone as pretty as you are must have a tongue in their head. *Is* your name Phœbe?" And the arrogant blue eyes danced with quizzical amusement.

"No—it's Prudence." (This *foolish* feeling!)

"Prudence?" The young man flung back his head and laughed delightedly. "Jove! That's a good one!" Then, as his horse curvetted nervously in the roadway: "Whoa there, old lady! Calm yourself! This way! Nearer the hedge!" Animal and rider moved closer to the apple-orchard and the pretty, flushed young girl. "Tell me, Miss Prudence, do you always live up to your name?"

She made a mighty effort after nonchalance and ease. To answer in the same light, bantering spirit would show this amazing stranger he had made an error, and she wasn't quite the tongue-tied fool he thought she was.

"I have no opportunity to be anything but Prudence," she replied demurely.

He eyed the faded gingham gown and shabby shoes. Gad! she might be quite a beauty if she only had a decent frock. Even haughty Virginia Dale up at the Towers was no better-featured. It would be a bit of a lark to dress this rustic maiden up and parade her to the other as a rival!

But aloud he merely said, with a Gay Lothario air:

"I should think that opportunity lurked for you at every corner."

Prudence smiled enchantingly.

"There aren't really many corners in the country. It's all quite open——"

"And above-board, eh?" He flung her an odd

look. Was she deeper than she seemed? One never knew. . . .

Then, seeing her stiffen, he added hastily:

"You fit into the picture here all right, but you'd certainly be a riot in the city. Why don't you cut and run?"

She lifted puzzled brows.

"Run where?"

"To places where you'd be better appreciated. Lady Hamilton was a country lass, you know. And not any prettier than you are."

Prudence laughed softly, musically. To the jaded listener, the sound of it was as a freshet of delight.

"The turnips and potatoes keep me far too busy." (Let him think her a 'field-hand' if he wanted to! She didn't care!)

He grinned. "Oh, please be more poetic. *Eve* and the *apple*. . . ."

"Quite happy in an Adamless Eden!" she flung back at him, with mischief in her bright dark eyes.

The man on the other side of the hedge was agreeably surprised to find this little country girl capable of repartee. Jove! he believed he'd stay a little longer in the country, dashed monotonous though it had hitherto proved to be. He could creep away from Virginia Dale whenever she grew tiresome and exacting, and find solace in flirtation with this pretty Prudence in the apple-orchard.

Young girls usually bored him to extinction. They were either hopelessly insipid, or—as often in his 'set'—impertinently 'knowing.' He had no time for either class.

But pretty Prudence, though 'beneath' him, promised a certain piquancy combined with lack of know-

ledge of the world which really was refreshing in these days. Gad! even her *name* was a sort of challenge! Prudence indeed! Hadn't he flung it to the winds these many years?

"Tell me, little lady, have you got a sweetheart?" His voice held all the beguiling sweetness of the courting male. (Just as well to know how the land lay in this quarter . . . not, of course, that he couldn't easily cut out all the local Reubens, if he tried!)

Prudence dangled her sun-bonnet by its long strings. Oh, for finesse to dangle this amazingly attractive man in like manner, with the skill and nimbleness of—say—the beautiful Virginia Dale up at the Towers, who always had a string of swains about her! That was the one sure way to *hold* a suitor wasn't it? Brains, and clever repartee, and subtlety, and lots of self-assurance. How lamentably she—Prudence—lacked these admirable assets!

But hard facts faced her. She was inexperienced. There were no lovers in the offing. Why prevaricate?

"No. There's no one. I—I'm kept pretty busy. Lots to do about the farm." She drooped her head.

So—as he'd thought—she *was* a dairymaid. Considerably above her job, too. Gad! it was a waste!

"And to me you seemed like Marie Antoinette or one of her court beauties, playing at farming!" he flung back gallantly, leaning a little closer, and flashing those gay blue eyes so full of deviltry upon her. Then, with beguiling charm in every cadence of his voice:

"And I—*I* haven't got a sweetheart, either. Couldn't you take pity on my loneliness?"

She raised her head, her sweet mouth set as though every feminine instinct warned her she must fight

against the enclouding fascination of this strange young man.

"People like you are never lonely," she said, half below her breath.

He was still looking directly at her, but the gay deviltry in his eyes had vanished, and his smile was wistful.

"That's all you know, you little sleeping princess of the apple-orchard," he said gently. "As a matter of fact, I'm the most infernally lonely fellow in the world. Crowds don't make company, you know. And—and one gets so awfully disappointed——"

"How?"

"Oh, just in everything. The general rottenness of life."

Silence in the green world all about them. Sunlight filtering through the trees to lay great golden patches on the grass. A hush that seemed—to Prudence's mind—as though the world, the enchanted world of lovers and young life and spring and beauty, were tensed and waiting for this handsome youth's next utterance, and its import. . . .

"Yes. Tell me more."

"Women are so—so disillusioning. They take one's dreams, and break them, and one wakes up more sceptical than ever." (Had he forgotten that his hearer was nothing but a little country dairymaid?)

Prudence moved nearer the green hedge—and him. The appeal in his voice, his eyes, had hypnotized her, so that she scarcely knew the hot defence that tumbled forth.

"You're wrong, quite wrong. I know you are. There are heaps of wonderful girls in the world . . . sincere girls who mean every single word they say . . .

who wouldn't stoop to deceive a man, but be loyal and true, and . . . and everything. . . ."

Her voice caught on an odd little tremor, and there was a glisten in her pretty eyes betokening tears. It hurt, actually *hurt*, to think that a man so amazingly attractive, so—so *lovable*—could have been ill-treated by some hateful creature unworthy of the name of woman! If only she—Prudence—could make it up to him! If only she were rich and gay and clever——

"Jove! The little soul is capable of real emotion!" thought the man, an unaccustomed thrill faintly stirring his jaded pulses. It would be a new sensation to play on these emotions, to call forth charming melodies from an instrument at once so highly-strung and so responsive!

Chapter II *At the Garden-Party*

BEFORE the mirror in her long, low-ceiled sleeping-chamber stood Miss Prudence Page, twisting and turning impatiently to get an adequate glimpse of her own charming self in the foot-square bit of glass that was set upon the dressing-table.

Prudence was going to a garden-party at the Towers. Her frock was apple-green, and her hat large and drooping, with a spray of blossom round it. Her face was an enchanting picture in that frame, but the girl was filled with nervous apprehension, and a fear that she was badly dressed.

"Do I look awful, Janet?" she asked of her staunch friend, who was also bidden to the feast.

"Awful? You look adorable, you silly child!" responded Janet brusquely and honestly. "You

ought to be labelled 'The Promise of Spring' in that frock. You're right in fashion, too, for I hear that green is all the rage in Paris."

"Almond green, not apple green," corrected Prudence. Then she added, with a sigh:

"The women up at the Towers will wear such lovely gowns, I'm terrified to go among them."

"Nonsense, girl. You'll look——"

"Oh, I know all you're going to say. 'Like a cottage daisy or a cabbage rose among the orchids.'" Prudence laughed mirthlessly. "But that doesn't give me confidence. I can't think why Mrs. Vansittart asks me."

"Then I can," responded Janet tartly. "It's because you're young and fresh and pretty, and a treat to look at, among those painted hags. They're a silly, empty-headed crowd, though I'll say Mrs. Vansittart is better than her friends, easily imposed upon and selfish as she is."

The two girls set off for their destination. It was a daily walk for Janet. Mrs. Vansittart's little girl was delicate, and needed treatment every afternoon. Janet was a clever masseuse, and well-paid.

"The goings-on of that crowd make me tired," continued the latter, as they walked along. "And the queer part is that, in spite of all the noise and racket, they don't really seem to have a good time, after all. Yesterday I had a square look at that Virginia Dale girl, and—believe me—her eyes were *old as Egypt!*"

"But she's quite a beauty," breathed Prudence in awed fashion. "I've often thought she was the loveliest thing I've ever seen."

"Then you haven't seen much," retorted Janet grimly. "Most of *her* complexion's on the dressing-

table, not to speak of a few odd curls and other 'aids.' She's simply terrified of getting fat, too. Had the impudence to call me into her room the other day when I was passing, and ask me to give her half-an-hour's massage, and what would my fee for a course be? 'Are you ill?' I said, very downright. At that, she gave me a high-and-mighty look down that saucy nose of hers, as though I were one of the maids who'd forgotten her place, and drawled: 'My good woman, don't you know that massage is used for keeping the figure slim?' 'I work under doctor's orders only,' I flung back at her. 'I'm a medical nurse and not a beauty specialist. If you want to keep your figure, eat and drink less, and knock off the wines.' She went straight to Mrs. Vansittart and complained that I'd been insolent to her, but Mrs. Vansittart only laughed and said she shouldn't turn up her nose at good advice!"

"Oh, Janet, how could you?" Prudence's eyes were wide.

"Poof! I'm not afraid of any woman. And I've no respect for the idle rich. They're not real ladies and gentlemen, for they take more out of the world than they put into it. There's only one man I've ever met at Wyndham Towers who could come up to Bernard Shaw's definition, and that's Peter Armstrong, the inventor."

"Definition of what?" asked Prudence, puzzled.

"Of a gentleman, my dear. Peter Armstrong puts more into life than he takes from it, if you get my meaning. He's a fiend for work. He's rented that tumble-down little place not far from where you live—called Pear-tree Cottage—and built on a small laboratory where he can conduct his experiments. Though

his hands are often stained with chemicals and his nails haven't the blinding polish so much in vogue at Wyndham Towers, believe me, he's a real gentleman in the best sense of the word. Little Lucia, my patient, who's got a weak back and suffers a good deal, was crying yesterday in the nursery, before I came—she thought I wasn't going to show up, and was disappointed, for the massage relieves her—and Peter Armstrong, who'd been asked to tea, happened to hear her, and went in and told her fairy-stories for an hour. Any man who's kind to children has a lot of good in him, and Lucia fairly worships him."

A glad thought darted through the other's mind. The good-looking stranger on horseback? *Could* it be the same?

"Is Mr. Armstrong rather slim, and fair, and very handsome?" she timidly inquired. It *must* be. . . . Even little Lucia had felt his fascination. . . .

Janet's lip curled.

"Not he! I detest handsome men. They're conceited apes, the most of them. Armstrong's a big, broad-shouldered fellow, dark and sunburnt. Fine teeth and eyes, and lots of strength. A real man's man, and no 'lounge-lizard,' no beauty-boy, except in so far as handsome is as handsome does!"

Prudence's face had fallen momentarily. Then she said, as though to herself:

"I wonder who the other could have been?"

Janet soon was listening to the story of the passing horseman. At its conclusion she pursed her lips and looked rather queer.

"That was the Traymore fellow, I imagine. He's a hanger-on of Miss Virginia Dale's."

Prudence felt the warm blood rush to her cheeks,

and her heart contracted painfully. He had touched that sensitive heart in passing, so that she had been unable to get him out of her thoughts for a single moment since their romantic meeting.

And now . . . *now* when there was a chance that she should see him once again, to hear he was the lover of a being so far removed from her own small sphere of life, so infinitely superior to herself, so richly endowed with all the arts of beauty and of fascination . . . it was *cruel!*

Janet gave her an odd sidelong glance, opened her lips as though to speak, and then closed them definitely.

But none the less did Prudence have the clear impression that her friend—had she been so minded—could have told a thing or two about the 'Traymore fellow' that would have proved hard hearing, and disturbing to her peace of mind.

She shook the feeling off. The sun was shining. She would meet him, trust him. Who knew what happiness the afternoon might bring?

* * * * *

The grounds of Wyndham Towers were very lovely. A whole raft of gardeners kept them so. For centuries the green lawns had been rolled and tended, till they had attained that velvet beauty that the years alone can bring.

Beds of tulips—pink and red and yellow—made a fascinating splash of colour on the grass. Late daffodils were nodding golden heads. There were plots of pansies, golden-hearted, purple-fringed. And a whole sea of shy forget-me-nots that smiled, blue-eyed, upon the throng of visitors who moved hither and thither on the lawns, the women gay in pretty colours, and the scene bright and animated.

"So sweet of you to come!" gushed the hostess, extending a fashionably limp hand in welcome, and taking quick survey of Prudence's frock. "My dear Miss Page, if there were more girls like you in the country, then I wouldn't have to cram my house with girls from town!"

This was evidently intended as a compliment, and merited a 'smart' reply. But Prudence was suddenly overcome with shyness, and that dreadful 'bottled-up' sensation which made her feel immeasurably a country bumpkin, tongue-tied.

"I'm sure you're dying for a cup of tea," rattled on the hostess. "The marquee's over by the laburnum trees. Teddie, my child"—turning to a weedy, chinless youth who was hovering on the outskirts of a group of laughing girls—"Teddie, be a sweet lamb, and take Miss Page over to the marquee for a cup of tea, will you?"

The 'sweet lamb' rather sulkily disattached himself, and was presented to Miss Prudence. Janet had sped off towards the house, to minister to her little patient, so the two set off alone.

"How- how very pretty it does look—the copper-beeches and laburnums and those lilac-trees in bloom!" stammered Prudence to her unwilling escort. "It reminds me of some place I've been before."

"Longchamps?" suggested the 'sweet lamb,' showing a faint spark of interest. "Keen on racin', are you, eh?"

"Oh no."

"Odd. Very odd." He twisted the moustache that was the size of a dwarfed tooth-brush. "You don't care for gees?"

Prudence thought of the old mare she sometimes rode, and blushed.

"I do ride just a little——"

The chinless youth went rambling on, abstractedly: "I'm a town man myself. The country's rather poisonous for a long spell, don't you think? I've been here a week, and already feel like one of those priceless mummies they hauled out of Tutankhamen's tomb, or whatever the blighter's called." Then, brightening: "If it weren't for Jinny, I'd give the green fields a miss, every time. But Jinny's a wonder. I'll tell the world she is!"

Could 'Jinny' be a horse? thought Prudence. She was almost sure of it as the 'sweet lamb' continued: "Jinny's a high-stepper, if ever there was one. In great form to-day. You've seen her? Eh?"

"I really don't know very much about horses," began Prudence awkwardly, when Teddie burst into a great guffaw.

"Oh lord! How comical! I'm not speaking of the stables, but about a *girl*! Virginia Dale!" he gurgled. "This beats the band! She'll scream when she hears the bloomer you've made. Jinny has a real sense of humour. I'll say she has!"

Prudence had reddened to her very ears. They were in the marquee now, and Teddie was still chortling, so that people were turning round to look at them. And —heavens!—Virginia Dale herself, enchantingly pretty in a Rue de la Paix creation, orchid-tinted, wheeled round from a group of smart young men, and languidly inquired:

"And whence the merry Ha-ha! chuckle-headed Teddie? What's the priceless joke?"

"He—he! You must forgive me, Miss Prudence,

if I tell 'em ? " Teddie wiped his eyes. " Jinny, this is Miss Prudence Page, and she—she took you for a *horse !* Ho ! Ho ! "

" Did she, indeed ? " Virginia's smile was insolence personified. She favoured Prudence with the look one might give a beetle or some crawling insect when one hesitates whether or no to stamp on it. " But I suppose Miss Page isn't accustomed to thoroughbreds—and hence the error. Was that it ? "

Prudence wished that the ground might open and swallow her up. Her embarrassment was in no way lessened when one of the men was heard to titter, in a stage aside :

" Prudence has been imprudent, and had better turn a new Page ! "

Hateful, *hateful* people ! *Why* had she come here to be made the butt of their buffoonery ? Her cheeks burned with a bitter shame, and her tongue was quite incapable of either repartee or explanation.

" Tea, madam ? " A waiter touched her elbow. " China or Ceylon ? "

" Yes. Yes. Any kind." Grateful for the diversion, she turned her back on the grinning group, and moved over to the long table that ran down one side of the marquee. " Milk, please. No lemon. Thanks."

Her hands shook so that some of the liquid spilled into the saucer. A mist of anger and agonized embarrassment rose before her eyes, so that the whole scene became a blur. Oh ! to get out of this hateful tent, to fly from these smart snobs with their edged tongues and jeering laughter, and seek peace and refuge in the apple-orchard. That quiet haven never failed her. . . .

And then a man's voice, soothing as balm on wounds,

sweet and beguiling as a melody once known and loved, quick with a pleased surprise, sounded beside her :

" If it isn't my little princess of the apple-orchard ! Well, I'm lucky ! " The cup was taken from her shaking fingers, and both her hands were clasped in two strong ones. Yes, it was he, her hero . . . blond Prince Charming of the highways . . . come to rescue at the eleventh hour a damsel in distress !

Chapter III *The Stolen Kiss*

' NOTHING succeeds like success,' as the old adage has it. And when the fastidious Bertram Traymore ' fussed ' about the little country girl, others of his sex came up to be presented, and to see just where the fascination lay.

Prudence had quite a phalanx of smart men about her. Several, indeed, deserted from Virginia's camp, greatly to the latter's chagrin, and came over to the little nobody from nowhere.

Through a crack in the wall of coats she could see Miss Dale glance hastily in a little pocket-mirror—that sure ally !—flick a swan's-down powder-puff across her cheeks, and then dart an envenomed glance across the tent at the usurper.

Doubly, therefore, was she glad when Mr. Traymore said, with that cool ease of manner that was one of his special attributes :

" Let's get out for a breath of air, Miss Page. I want to show you the trout-pool before some other chap butts in and tries to steal you away ! "

He elbowed a path for her out of the tent.

When they were beyond earshot of the others, he lowered his voice to a caressing note.

"You don't know what a thrill it gave me, when I saw you here at the Towers, of all places——"

Prudence raised her pretty eyes. A measure of self-confidence had returned to her.

"The dairymaid transplanted!" she said, laughing.

The young man grabbed her elbow, walking very close beside her.

"My dear, do give me credit for knowing a gentlewoman when I see one. I knew you were of my world—spoke the same language, that's to say—the moment I clapped eyes upon you in the apple-orchard."

This was untrue. But its untruth escaped Miss Prudence. So did the arrogance of the little speech.

"You haven't ridden by, since then," she said uncertainly. "Often I thought that you would come

So she had missed him, had she? A flattering vision of little Sister Anne gazing along the dusty highway, all in vain, rose photographically before him. And flattery was something that he couldn't possibly resist.

"If I'd followed my own inclination, I'd have camped right on your doorstep, even though Prudence—in two senses—warned me off!"

A thrill went through his listener, also a great wave of relief that fate had given them both this opportunity for explanation.

He went on:

"But a burnt child dreads the fire, and I was afraid of you—of you—Miss Prudence——"

"Afraid of *me*?" (How too ridiculous!) "What could you possibly be afraid of?" Her heart was

hammering beneath the apple-green gown. She hung on his reply.

"If a man's been a wanderer all his life, yet longing for a hearthstone, and he sees a fire—a beautiful, glowing fire that could put new life into him—you couldn't blame him for wanting to sit down and linger in its warmth, could you? That's the way I felt about you, the day I met you."

"Did you, really?" The inane query was the only thing that she could find to say.

Mr. Traymore went on, with a wistful air:

"But wanderers have no right to hearthstones. And if they tarry there, they may get burnt." (He was almost certain that he'd mixed his metaphors, but this simple-hearted child was certainly no critic!)

Prudence racked her brain to reassure him. She didn't want to seem too bold. If only she could delicately imply that he could warm himself for ever at her fire, and be a more than welcome guest! And as for getting burnt . . . well . . . could life hold anything more wonderful than being allowed to heal his wounds, and comfort him?

They walked across the lawns, past the conservatories and the Italian garden to a little stream that gurgled on the outskirts of the woods. It widened in a sort of mossy clearing, and its trill sank to silence in the trout-pool underneath a drooping willow-tree.

"Suppose we sit down here for a bit, and get to know each other?" suggested Traymore, patting the moss beside the water's edge.

Prudence hesitated, then complied with the request. The man flung his slim length beside her, chin propped on one hand, and eyes—blue and at the moment oddly inscrutable—fixed on her charming, shy young face.

"This is *my* idea of a good time. Crowds don't make company. And really I was half afraid I shouldn't get you to myself at all." With his free right hand he touched a fold of her silken gown. "Jove! you don't know how wonderful you look!"

Prudence rallied her forces for an answer of some sort.

"I've always been told that looks don't matter. Brains and—and character—and that sort of thing—count most."

"Don't you believe it!" He laughed gently, mockingly. "Some jealous woman's been trying to get at you, that's all. It's a fine philosophy for the wall-flowers, and very consoling for old maids and blue-stockings, but a pretty girl like you ought to go down on her knees every night and thank heaven for the beauty she's been accorded—for it's her best weapon, every time."

He caught her hand in his, gave it a quick pressure, and went on:

"If I'd seen your friend Miss Mercer, for instance, feeding the chickens on that never-to-be-forgotten day when I came riding by, d'you think for a moment I'd have fallen head over heels in love with *her*, stern follower of duty as no doubt she is?" His eyes seemed half quizzical, but the 'spark' was burning there, threatening every moment to burst into a conflagration.

Prudence forgot to rush to the defence of the absent Janet. That magic phrase and its insinuation—'fallen head over heels in love'—it drove all other feelings from her heart. *Was* it . . . *could* it be possible that she had made so deep an impression on this wonderful young man? Was her beauty

really such that it had drawn him like a magnet?

She turned to face him, her eyes sweet and dewy underneath the drooping hat.

"You think, then, that a person can . . . can be attracted . . . all in a moment . . . to another person . . . without even talking much?"

"I don't just 'think' it, I *know* it," came the quick reply. Young Traymore sat up straight, and caught both her hands in his. "Didn't you guess that something happened to me the moment my eyes lighted on you in the apple-orchard? Prudence, don't be cruel. Don't you know just how I feel about you? No, don't move away." He flung an arm about her slender waist and drew her closer. "Little girl—my little princess—I'm just mad about you!" And his hot lips bent themselves on hers in a quick, stolen kiss. . . .

"You have no right to do that sort of thing! No right at all!"

It was a new Prudence speaking. She had drawn herself away from his embrace, and definite rebuke was in her tone. Did the man *really* think she was the sort of girl who could be treated lightly? Well, she'd just show him. . . .

Traymore had the grace to look a little awkward. He had not expected any reluctance on her part. Even now he wondered if she wasn't pretending? . . . Girls didn't usually rebuff him.

"I'm frightfully sorry. Sorry if I've offended you, that's to say. I couldn't be sorry for the other thing. It was too wonderful!"

Prudence rose, as though to put an end to the discussion.

"We'd better go back. Mrs. Vansittart will think

it odd if we don't." She was astonished at the semblance of composure she had summoned up. Inwardly, her heart was hammering madly. But not for worlds would she let this spoilt young man guess the tumult he had caused.

"Oh, come, be merciful!" He rose, too, and put a half-apologetic, half-protesting hand upon her arm. "Haven't I said I'm sorry? What else can I do to show you that I mean it?" (What an absurd fuss about a kiss! And, really, she *had* encouraged him, right up to the last moment. Illogical creatures, women! This one was very young, of course—a mere flapper. But not quite so green as he'd thought her!)

"Mrs. Vansittart will expect——"

"Oh, bunkum!" He was beginning to be quite annoyed. "Our hostess doesn't give two hoots what her guests do, so long as they enjoy themselves. And —come—confess—you and I *were* enjoying ourselves in the most harmless manner up to the time of my little error of judgment!"

"I don't think enjoyment can be found in—in insincerity." Prudence was wavering. He was *so* attractive . . . and the *joie de vivre* of this sweet afternoon in spring was on her.

"And who's been insincere? Not I, fair lady! I *meant* that kiss."

A little thrill ran through her veins like molten fire. And yet—and yet—she must pretend she wasn't in the least bit touched—she *must not* seem too 'easy.'

They strolled along beside the rippling brook. Forget-me-nots were growing by the water's edge, and in a quiet backwater a mother bird was teaching her young brood to swim. The whole world seemed young and gay and beautiful.

"It would be cooler in the woods," suggested Traymore, steering his companion through a little clearing towards the pine-trees. It smelt very fragrant here, and bluebells grew in wild profusion. Prudence plucked a sheaf of them and thrust them in the loose sash of her frock.

She wished this fascinating young man would talk about himself. What did he do with his life? What was his business or profession? She contrived to put a query to him.

He was rather vague.

"I've been out in Canada for some little time. The guv'nor gave me an allowance." (A 'remittance man,' was he? Prudence's heart contracted.)

He went on:

"The life was far too hard. I tried fruit-farming for a bit. Loathsome and back-breaking experience! So I chucked it, and came home. But it was awfully difficult to get a decent job after the war. So the 'old man' gave me a couple of thousand for capital, and off I went to Rhodesia, which—if you believed the ads.—was simply booming."

"Yes?" inquired his listener, much engrossed in the recital.

"The place was frightfully over-rated. I sank all my cash, and some more that I'd borrowed, in cattle and tobacco. The cattle died, and the tobacco crop was an absolute fizzle. Hence the prodigal returned, minus career and fortune!"

Prudence's heart was touched. It was too awful to see the boys who had fought so gallantly in the Big Show so 'up against it' now. Unemployment was rife. Jobs were at a discount. It was the irony of fate that, having battled for years to make the

world a safer and a happier place, they themselves should be paying the penalty.

"But it's no good grumbling," continued young Traymore, sauntering through the fragrant woods beside her. "Life's really a sort of merry gamble. I'm not worrying."

"Does your father still make you an allowance?" The girl's cheeks flushed after she had put the question, 'calculating' as it sounded.

"Oh yes. The old buffer's quite a decent soul, in his way. I don't do at all badly. His name's good in the City, and my tailor gives me heaps of credit. And I play the market quite a bit."

What did that mean? She was to be enlightened.

"Buying on margin, you know. Flights on the stock-exchange. Nose-dived rather badly last week, but I'll soon make it up. Besides"—his eyes shone—"I've just been put on to an awfully good thing. Expect it'll make a fortune, though it's cram full of risks. You can guess what it is, if you read the daily papers."

"Indeed I can't guess," said Prudence quickly. "Won't you tell me?"

"My dear girl, don't you realize that the two most powerful countries in the world are quarrelling over a point of law which involves tremendous business——" Here he broke off. 'But I'm not going to bore you with money-making schemes on a perfect day like this." (Gad! he'd only just pulled himself up in time from giving the show away—and there was no knowing if she were trustworthy! To think that any girl could make such a fool of him!)

They were both quite happy after that. Young Traymore made himself extremely charming.

As they neared the trout-pool, he gave an annoyed exclamation.

"Jove! That chap poaching again! He has the devil's own impertinence! I'll teach him a lesson!"

The girl's gaze followed her companion's stride in the direction of a tall, shabbily-clad young man who —complete with rod and fishing tackle—was 'casting' from the bank with an air of intense absorption. A disreputable pipe projected from one corner of his mouth. His grey flannel suit had evidently seen much service. Down over his eyes was drawn a weather-stained and shapeless hat.

Traymore strode up to this young man and peremptorily addressed him. The 'poacher' listened quietly, then said something which Prudence, standing well behind the pair, failed to catch. Traymore's voice grew louder and more insolent. The young man shifted his fishing-rod to the left hand, still puffing at his pipe, and listening coolly to the tirade. Then, suddenly, his patience evidently at an end, he swung his right fist to the other's jaw, and—splash! Traymore the immaculate went head over heels backward in the water!

Chapter IV *The Amazing Tramp*

TO the surface of the pool rose Traymore, a ridiculous, bedraggled figure, panting and blowing. His blond locks—normally so smooth and shining, giving to the head a boot-button appearance that was very smart—now hung like a shaggy dog's over his eyes. He spluttered:

"You'll pay for this, you swine!" and scrambled,

soaking, up the bank, an absurd apparition rent with fury.

"I shouldn't annoy me any further, were I you," said the muscular young poacher, with a grin. "Next time it won't be just a ducking. It'll be the sort of damn good licking you ought to have had as a kid, and never got. I'm ready if you are——" Then, catching sight of the astounded Prudence, he pulled the pipe out of his mouth and removed the shabby hat from his head, revealing a thick thatch of dark brown hair with an uncontrollable wave in it.

"I beg your pardon. I didn't notice that this—this fellow had a lady with him. I'm sorry if I startled you."

"You had no business to behave in such a brutal way!" breathed Prudence, darting to the side of the bedraggled Traymore, and putting a championing hand upon his soaking arm. The latter stood hesitant, ready to spit forth fire and brimstone at his assailant, but acutely conscious of the risks. "You ought to be arrested. You ought to——" She broke off, her gaze following the 'poacher's' to a rivulet of water that was running from the dripping Traymore down the front length of her frock. "Oh! Oh!" She moved a foot or two away.

"That's right." The stranger grinned approval. "He isn't worth ruining a gown for." Then, sharply, to the other: "You can cut through the woods back to the house without anyone seeing you, so I'd advise you to run while the going's good, in case I change my mind, and give you the hammering you need. I'll take the young lady back to the Towers——"

"Indeed you won't!" Prudence flung at him, turning to Traymore, only to find that gentleman

already on the move. As he retreated, the latter muttered a volley of threats as to what he'd do when he was changed, and clad, and in his normal state.

"Wait for me. I'm coming too," she called. But the poacher put a restraining hand upon her arm.

"He doesn't want you. Best leave him alone. A fellow doesn't like a girl to see him in that condition. Hurts his vanity, you know."

She wheeled round, eyes flashing. How dare a common tramp address her so? (And how maddening that Traymore had shown the white feather! Of course this perfect *brute* was at the bottom of the whole episode! He had caught the other at an unguarded moment, and now was *glorying* in his achievement! Well, she'd show the cad just what she thought of him!)

"Will you kindly remove your hand from my arm? Unless of course your brutality goes so far as to want to hurt me, too?"

An icy scorn was in her voice, although no fear. *Odd* that she wasn't in the least afraid, for tramps were dangerous fellows. But this man was no common tramp. He had quite a well-bred accent, and looked one directly in the eyes. They were handsome eyes, dark grey, and curiously vivid in his sunburnt face. And—yes—they twinkled with a real sense of humour.

She was annoyed with herself for observing all these things. . . . His face, of course, with that terribly square line of jaw and chin, was ugly. *Strong*, perhaps, some folks might call it. But brute force—particularly after the recent unwarranted exhibition of it—didn't in the least appeal to *her*! Oh no! He lacked the slim grace, the debonair charm, the *breeding* of young Traymore. (Stay! *Was* it breeding to have

sneaked off like a whipped cur, and left her to the tender mercies of this man ?)

"I beg your pardon," said the tramp again. "I'm not used to ladies' company." He withdrew his hand. "I'm a boor."

"You are, indeed!" She was annoyed at the effect of the dark grey eyes upon her, and therefore doubly sharp. "Before I go, I'd like to say how much I despise your behaviour—and and *you*! And I hope we may never meet again!"

"Your wish is likely to be granted," replied the tramp, unruffled. "I'm not a squire of pretty dames, as I've already said."

This was too much! Prudence stamped her foot.

"You forget your place," she cried. "You had no right to offer to escort me up to the Towers. The servants would turn you out at once. You—you're dreadful impossible. Don't you understand?"

He bowed ironically, and smiled—a smile that lit his whole face up, as though he really were amused by her. His teeth, so white and even, would certainly have defied a dentist's art. Suddenly she saw that he was quite good-looking, almost handsome!

"I bow to your verdict. If they've no use for me up at the big house, then I've certainly no use for them. It's fifty-fifty, and everyone delighted."

"What do you mean?" she stammered, astounded at this speech.

He smiled again, as though she were an ignorant child, and it amused him to enlighten her.

"I mean that the only interesting people, to my mind, are those who do some honest *work* in the world," quoth he. "The idlers bore me to extinction. Display of fine cars, and jewels, and clothes don't go to

prove that the owners have anything in their brain-cells, or are equipped to give one a new viewpoint on life. It's usually the other way around. But there —I can hardly expect *you* to understand me, can I ? "

" And why not, pray ? " Prudence stood erect before him, cheeks a-blaze.

" Because you judged me by the outside —by the shabby clothes I'm wearing "—he smiled cheerfully— " because you haven't quite grown up. If you ever do "- (ah ! that was insult heaped on insult !)— " you'll learn that, though the world seems full of people of unlimited means whose money can buy them the entry in most places, the worth-while folks are the *thinking* ones who hold a definite place among the workers, and whom growing people like myself—can take a real interest in meeting. See ? "

She was so startled at the ' tramp's ' fluency of speech that a reply failed her. And just at that psychological moment, from behind the pair, there came a light, high laugh, the whiff of a delightful perfume, and then a woman's voice, gay and challenging :

" Hi there, you renegade ! Why wouldn't you come to the party when I most *specially* invited you ? I've been hunting for you all the afternoon."

Prudence and the man wheeled round to confront the beautiful Virginia Dale, whose eyes—oddly provocative—were all for the ' tramp ' Prudence had scorned.

" It was really rather beastly of you, Peter," she was pouting. " I waited and waited for you, and then you go and forget all about me, and put on your old fishing togs, and——"

A great flash of light dawned on Prudence. Peter ? The tramp ? Why, he was no tramp . . . how *could* she have blundered so ? . . . he must be—yes—he

must be *Peter Armstrong the inventor* . . . brilliantly clever . . . lover of children . . . the 'real gentleman' Janet had so raved about!

And she—ignorant little Prudence—she had snubbed him so!

* * * * *

"If I come down to Pear-Tree Cottage to-morrow afternoon, will you give me a cup of tea, Peter?" begged Miss Virginia Dale in her most fascinating voice.

She stood there on the pool's edge, gazing up at Prudence's 'tramp' as though he were the only creature on the earth. As for Prudence herself, she might be a mere pebble on the bank, for all the notice that the other girl took of her.

Prudence was acutely conscious of the very awkward situation. Her own escort ignominiously fled . . . her crude error as to the social status of this man . . . and now to be the unwilling 'gooseberry' in a love-scene!

But it was in no lover's tones that the shabby fisherman replied, unhesitatingly:

"I'm no great hand at making tea, Miss Dale. Indeed"—turning with a twinkle towards Prudence—"this young lady here will bear me out when I tell you I've no social graces of any sort!"

Virginia crinkled her pert nose in disdain. She didn't even glance at the flushed cheeks of the other maiden.

"Some people have no common sense," she cryptically observed. "But as for social graces, I like you better without 'em, Peter. You couldn't be a 'lounge lizard' if you tried."

(What on earth was a 'lounge lizard'? wondered Prudence, growing more uncomfortable every moment.)

"Heaven forbid!" The grey eyes crinkled into the most delightful little furrows at the corners.

"But, just the same, I'm coming down to tea to-morrow," said the young beauty in the ravishing Paris gown, with a determined air. "I shan't permit you to be such a hermit, Peter. It's bad for you never to have a woman round the place."

He grinned again. Against her own judgment, Prudence had to admit there was something really charming in that smile of his.

"How about old Nannie for a sweet feminine influence? She's as deaf as a door-post, as silent as the grave, and never interferes with me. My ideal woman, in fact." He turned to Prudence, laughing. "Old Nannie cooks and cleans for me," he said, explanatory-wise.

Virginia tittered angrily. He went on:

"I'm spending the whole of to-morrow in my laboratory at that new experiment I'm working on—as a penance for playing truant to-day."

Virginia flung a sharp look at the 'difficult' young man, and then at Prudence. Had the two had a rendezvous here by the stream? And was there anything between the pair of them? It was bad enough to have this simple country maid walk off with Bertram Traymore—*her* especial property—but it was *maddening* to think that she was chasing Peter—oddly attractive, oddly elusive Peter, who was so *different* from the others!

Peter was looking quizzically at her, as though he read her thoughts. Sometimes she had the uncanny feeling that he possessed a sixth sense, and did know

what was passing in her mind! He said now, chaffingly:

"I didn't come here expecting to meet a lovely lady . . . no, not one, *two* lovely ladies . . ." he corrected himself. "Nor was I like Narcissus, gazing into the pool at the reflection of my own beauty—being an ugly chap and well aware of the fact. The right to fish in this pool and down stream is included in the rent of Pear-Tree Cottage, Mrs. Vansittart being my landlord—so I came here to woo the elusive trout."

So he'd had the *right* to fish these waters, after all! thought Prudence, harking back to Traymore's officious conduct, and its summary rebuke. This Peter man had behaved abominably, but of course there *had* been provocation! . . .

"If you won't give me tea to-morrow, I shall put on overalls and come right into the lab. and help you with your work," announced Virginia Dale.

"Too dangerous!"

"*You? Dangerous?*" she cooed at him. "Don't you know a woman loves to play with fire?"

("How bold she is!" thought Prudence, her own cheeks a-flame. If only she could slip away unnoticed! . . .)

"I was speaking of my experiment, not of myself." Did the man's lip curl a little? "I assure you I'm distressingly safe. Quite un-Don-Juan-ish. Almost a back number."

Not for Virginia's sake, but on behalf of her whole sex did Prudence hate him at that moment, with his self-sufficient air.

"If you'll excuse me, I will go. No, don't come too." She moved as though to turn away.

He made bad worse by saying, with a twinkle:

"I promised your friend to see you safely to the Towers,"—and fell into step beside her, Virginia on the other side.

"I don't need an escort, thank you."

"Oh yes, you do. An escort—and a chaperone. We're filling the bill, aren't we, Miss Dale?" He glanced quizzically at Virginia, who tossed her head in real annoyance. Did the man really think she was much older than this chit? A *chaperone*, indeed? How dare he? But of course he was just teasing! —tantalizing creature that he was!

"Call yourself a back number, but don't include *me* in it!" she flung back with assumed archness. "Miss Page and I are very much of an age, as a matter of fact."

"I am nineteen," said Prudence in prosaic tone.

"And never been kissed, I'll wager," tittered the other girl, annoyed at the naive announcement. She herself would never see twenty-seven again.

Prudence flushed up, and was silent. The recollection of Traymore's stolen kiss sent a little tremor through her, thrilling as it had been. Would he hate her now? she wondered. He had been too hasty with this Peter man, and had come off worst in the encounter. She had been an unhappy witness of the scene.

Oh!—yes—she cared for him! No use denying it.

"I shan't come any further. I'm too disreputable," said Peter Armstrong, as they neared the lawns. Prudence walked on, leaving the other girl to bid adieu to him. Oh! hateful man!

"I WAS just coming to fetch you, little lady," announced young Traymore airily, as Prudence encountered him later at the garden party, in a dry suit and looking very handsome. "I want to apologize for that infernally awkward scene down by the pool. If you hadn't been there, I'd have given the chap the thrashing of his life. But because he was a boor was no reason why *I* should follow suit."

"Of course not," defended Prudence quickly. "You were wonderful, the way you acted."

The young man shot her a quick look. Did she mean to be sarcastic?

But no. Her pretty face held only a flattering mixture of concern, and admiration.

"It was only your presence that made me hold myself in. Any fellow who makes a row in front of a girl, ought to be kicked."

She nodded sympathetically.

"After this show's over, I'm going down and have it out with him," proceeded Traymore, gaining confidence. "I'll teach him his proper place."

"Oh don't." The girl's face was full of a quick concern again. Visior of the other's muscular dexterity rose up before her. "He's frightfully strong. . . ."

This was a tactical error, an actual aspersion on Traymore's brawn. He thrust out his chest at once.

"I'm not such a weakling myself." He reddened. "And I'm certainly not afraid to tackle him, if that's what you mean. Brute force doesn't alarm me in the least."

"He's not a tramp, after all," said Prudence, sorry

for her error, but not knowing what to say to make amends. "He's the Peter Armstrong who lives in Pear-Tree Cottage and who does experiments——"

"I know. I know," said Traymore testily. "If I'd thought he was a common tramp, would I have left you with him as I did? I know all about the fellow, drat his insolence!"

"He says he has permission to fish the pool——"

"Making up to you, was he?" Her companion's voice was full of resentment. "He ought to have gone down on his knees, and apologized."

"He did apologize," said Prudence with her native honesty. "When he struck you, he hadn't seen *me*."

"The dickens he hadn't! And I suppose when he did see you, you absolutely bowled him over?"

She flushed in hurt silence, and drew away from him. Traymore spoke again.

"Shouldn't be a bit surprised if the whole thing was a frame-up, just to get me out of the way, so's he could talk to you!"

This was too much.

"How can you speak like that, when it was *you* who picked a quarrel with him?"

"Huh?" Traymore shot her a sidelong glance. "He'd be flattered if he knew the champion he's found in you, wouldn't he?"

Quick, sensitive tears sprang to her eyes.

The inquisitor continued:

"You haven't by any chance fallen in love with him, have you?"

"How can you say such things?" stammered the girl. "Why, I—I *hate* him. I—I'm in love with nobody." Her lips trembled.

The man's face softened.

"Not even a little tiny bit with *me*?" With all the beguilement of the courting male, the query came, ever so gently, so that she just caught it, and no more.

A thrill shot through her heart. Unhappiness and doubt were all forgotten. Spring-time reigned again.

"And what do you think of Peter Armstrong?" Janet Mercer asked her as the two girls walked home that evening.

"I hate him," said Prudence quickly. "He's so brusque, and rough-mannered. I dare say you'd call him one of Nature's gentlemen, but I dislike that sort of thing."

("The poor child is infatuated with Traymore," thought her shrewd friend, but said nothing.)

Subsequent days were full of ecstasy for Prudence. Blossom in the apple-orchard . . . sunny skies . . . and love! Each day she met young Traymore at some rendezvous, and they spent hours together . . . hours of enchantment for the little country girl when time itself seemed to stand still and listen to the lovers' vows and sighs and promises.

"I mean everything to you, don't I, Prudence?"

"Everything in heaven and earth You always will, Bert dear I- I've been wondering—if you wouldn't come in one evening, and meet father and mother I- I've told them about you ---"

"*What!* And I particularly asked you not to say one word about our love until I had the right to claim you "

"I I didn't, Ber . I remembered. I just said you were a a friend of mine."

He looked relieved. And mollified.

"Oh, well, I *will* come, one of these days. When

the mood takes me, darling. But you know how much I enjoy having you all to myself. Why drag others in?"

"But it's only father and mother. They're such dears." She would look at this masterful lover with pleading eyes.

"Come on, cheer up. You know I love you best when you're gay and lively. A fellow doesn't like a girl to mope."

One day, however, he did promise to take supper at the cottage on the following evening. Prudence spent long hours polishing up the silver and arranging flowers. Everything must look its very nicest for Bert. . . .

Her mother wore her best silk dress, and Prudence one of her prettiest frocks.

"The place doesn't *really* look so shabby, mother, does it?" the girl anxiously inquired for the tenth time.

"No, darling. Besides, he won't notice anything but you." The sympathetic woman knew exactly how her daughter felt. "You look a picture to-night, and no mistake."

They waited for a half-hour, then an hour . . . and no one came.

"Young man's forgotten his engagement," said Prudence's father in a matter-of-fact tone. "We can't wait any longer. I'm as hungry as a hunter."

It was a silent meal. Prudence's ears were keyed up nervously to all sounds in the road.

But by nine o'clock she knew he wouldn't come, and made excuses for him, though her heart was heavy.

It was nearly ten when she contrived to slip away from her mother's sympathetic eyes, and down the

road past a little thicket where a nightingale was singing madly to his mate.

If only Bert were with her! What a perfumed night of spring it was!

Along the road came the chug-chug of a motor-car. Prudence pushed into the shadow of the hedge as a two-seater came along, with a girl at the wheel and a man beside her. A young moon was up and there was something vaguely familiar in their outlines. It couldn't be. . . . Oh *no*! . . .

"Don't be silly, Bert," drifted towards the hedge in Virginia Dale's spoilt tones. "I can't drive and be made love to, at the same time——"

And then a man's low laugh—so dear and so well known to the shrinking listener in the hedge:

"Girls like you will always be made love to, Jinny!"

A pang of agony shot through the gentle heart of Prudence. Bert . . . her Bert . . . *her* lover . . . he could speak words such as that . . . and to another woman!

Worse than the phrase itself had been the tone in which it had been uttered! Low and entrancing, sweet with the strange beguilement that never once had failed to cast a spell upon herself, the murmured cadence of his voice brought torture to the little eavesdropper who loved him so!

Prudence, rigid with misery, crouched in the shadow of the hedge until the purring of the car died into silence, and she was alone again with the night, and the moon, and the maddening fragrance of green, growing things and flowers that seemed to mock her solitude and pain.

"Bert! Bert!" With a smothered sob she buried her face against the coolness of the grass, as though

on the breast of Mother Nature she would seek oblivion. "How . . . how *could* you, Bert?"

She loved him so. And loving meant *possession*, didn't it? Hadn't he often said so? "You're mine, aren't you, Prudence darling?" he had whispered, over and over again, as though he simply *had* to *own* her. "There isn't anybody in all your world—but me?"

How generously she had reassured him! How freely she had given her love, thinking—besotted little fool that she had been!—that love such as hers *begot* love in yet deeper measure, and that the more devotion she heaped upon him, the more he would return to her, in treble measure.

Why, he had told her so, a thousand times!

She had believed him, trusted him. How furious she had been at Janet Mercer's warning:

"Go easy, Prudence, child, and don't belie your name! A man's passion is the most evanescent thing on earth. Let him but think he has you, safe and sound, and the glory of the chase is ended! Traymore, of all men, is the hunter type. If you would keep him—and heaven knows why you want to!—keep him guessing. Have reserves. Hold back a bit."

The country maid, however, was too far gone in love to heed the warning. What did Janet Mercer really know of *la grande passion*? Hadn't Bert pointed out that women such as Janet—who were plain and downright and hard-working—never really stirred the hearts of men?

"She has no sex-attraction, darling. She's a bit sour on men, and who could blame her? Unloved women always get that way."

"But—she does *know* the world, Bert dearest! She's clever——"

"Bunkum! Who wants a woman to be clever? Beauty and magnetism are the drawing cards. The Mercer woman has neither, and she's sore that you're so pretty and attractive, and that I'm wild about you, and can't leave you alone——" Here the argument would end in kisses, and Prudence would fly the flag of truce.

Now her friend's candid words came back to her, with the piercing light of truth upon them.

"Your sentiments are very beautiful, Prudence, my child, and—though *I* may appreciate them—mere man does not! Camouflage your feelings! Hide your heart! Love this Traymore all you want to, if you must—but don't let him believe he's won your entire affection, for such a knowledge will be absolutely fatal! You will only lose him, dear."

Prudence had stared at her with indignant eyes.

"How can you say such awful things? Bert has assured me, over and over, that love begets love . . . and he says that what makes a man 'cool off' quicker than anything else is *uncertainty*! He's begged me to give him all my heart—and as for me, I wouldn't cause him a single moment's pain or jealousy—no, not for all the gold in Egypt!"

Janet had groaned in spirit. Too well she knew that the Bert Traymores of this world little appreciate such devotion.

"He's 'kidding' himself as well as you, then," she had cried despairingly. "Call me a cynic, call me a sour old maid, but mark my words, and profit by them while there's time. Hold back, Prudence. Check that overflowing heart of yours——"

But Prudence had swept off like an outraged little goddess, leaving Janet to her dismal meditations.

Now—too late—the cold white rays of truth were turned on what she'd said.

Bert Traymore, cloyed with the sweetness of her love for him, had turned for stimulation to the uncertain and coquettish 'Jinny,' who 'played' men oh! so cleverly! He had turned from real love to the false, from simple country beauty, unadorned and natural, to Jinny's artificial charms and battery of practised tricks. Dear heaven! it *couldn't* be. . . .

Prudence's pain and disillusionment were far too great for tears. She loved him . . . loved this fickle, fascinating man with every fibre of her being . . . and she couldn't shake the shackles off.

A vision of his face rose up before her, debonair and handsome. The mocking light was in his eyes, those eyes she loved . . . eyes that could gleam in arrogance, then melt in heavenly tenderness towards her.

At last she roused herself, trying to believe that this wretched evening had been nothing but a nightmare. Bert still loved her. He would come to her. Perhaps even now he had slipped away from the clutches of that vampire-woman, and was speeding towards the cottage?

Prudence rose from the grassy bank, and commenced running down the road towards her home, terrified to think her lover might be already gone. . . .

A light burned in the sitting-room. Hope rose in her bosom. Youth is optimistic, and mercurial in its swift recovery from pain.

Doubtless Bert was there . . . with her parents . . . explaining why he'd been detained . . . and

longing for a glimpse of her, his sweetheart. Virginia Dale was nothing in his life. He'd often told her so. He had 'played up' to 'Jinny' to-night, perhaps to placate her for his long neglect, to 'put her off the scent,' as once he had hinted was essential.

But, alas! Prudence's hopes were dashed. Her father and mother were alone!

She slipped up to her own room, and thence to bed, to ease her aching heart in tears that came at last in fullest measure.

Nineteen may be optimistic but it suffers so!

•

Chapter VI — *The Vampire-Woman*

"I CAN'T think what you see in that stupid little country chit," remarked the fascinating Jinny, as the two-seater car slid through the gates of the west lodge, and onwards towards the Towers.

Bert Traymore had the grace to look a trifle sheepish.

"She's all right. A mere kid, as you say."

Jinny shot a sharp glance at him in the moonlight. Did he think that she herself was a generation older? Had he the least inkling of her age?

Men like Traymore were remarkably astute, in lots of ways. It would be frightfully annoying--considering the time and trouble that she took with her appearance--if the truth leaked out!

Not, of course, that she couldn't hold him, if she wanted to! Jinny had that valuable asset--a tremendous belief in her own powers of fascination.

She had few illusions, and none concerning men. They were 'fair game' and deserved all they got. If she hurt them in the long run--and she flattered

herself that she had brought pangs of wounded vanity to a few!—hadn't every man Jack of them hurt shoals of women, in their day?

By some (to herself) perfectly logical process, Jinny rather considered herself a woman's champion, each scar that she inflicted on the enemy being part payment for past folly on *his* part!

It was a salve to conscience, too, this attitude of mind.

As for Bert Traymore . . . heavens! . . . the world was full of him! His cajoling tricks, his crocodile pathos, his eternal bid for sympathy, they were all an open book to her.

What was he saying now, to cover up the awkward silence? Something about men always wanting to make love to her? Well, why shouldn't they? She worked hard enough to 'make a hit' with the tiresome creatures, heaven alone knew why!

"You're hard-hearted, Jinny! You might slow up the machine, and let a fellow have a chance to talk to you."

He put a hand on hers.

She slowed up, turning a quizzical face towards him.

"Want to do a little vulgar spooning, eh?"

This crudity of speech was not her usual 'line' at all. Jinny was piqued to-night, the man decided, quickly.

Why?

Because of pretty Prudence, and the apple-orchard, and the fact of the stolen meetings having inadvertently leaked out!

There was something queer about all women, drat 'em! You never knew when you had, or didn't have,

them! Odd, and illogical, with very little rhyme or reason to their doings!

Hadn't Jinny snubbed him persistently for the last week? Yet now she was annoyed because he had betaken himself elsewhere for solace!

Prudence was a sweet young girl, and he was dashed fond of her, he told himself, with a fatuous smile that Jinny did not see. Her simple charm was in antithesis to the appeal of the sophisticated damsel by his side who now was 'piqued' with him.

"Like heather honey—and—and caviare!" He was amused at the acuteness of his own perception, and the aptitude of the comparison! Heather honey was sweet and fresh and natural, but its very sweetness—if one had too much of it—was cloying. But as for caviare—good heavens!—it was inordinately expensive, just like Jinny, and food for millionaires. Hadn't a tiny scrap of it, served on a tiny piece of buttered toast (at the demand of this self-same high-priced creature) cost him half-a-guinea on his last trip to town? Champagne and caviare were nectar and ambrosia of the gods, so Miss Virginia Dale must be a goddess!

Gad! That metaphor wasn't so far out. She *was* good-looking! The moonlight on her cleverly 'assisted' skin lent an ethereal beauty to her clean-cut features, toning down a certain hardness that occasionally was visible.

But Prudence . . . ah! *she* could stand any test. Something tugged for a moment at his—no, not heart, because Bert Traymore didn't cultivate such a disturbing organ. But as he thought of Prudence's fresh young beauty, the instinct to reach out and seize it for his own, much as a greedy little boy will pick some

lovely flower to satisfy a passing and ephemeral fancy, caught him, giving him a predatory thrill.

If only she'd cut out this nonsense about wanting to introduce him to her parents! The old folks weren't in his line at all. He'd caught glimpses of a patriarchal father, pottering round the farm, and looking old enough to be Prudence's grand-dad . . . handsome chap, but sort of stern and uncompromising. Would ask awkward questions, and maybe try and corner him about his 'intentions,' as those old buffers sometimes did!

'Intentions?' Obsolete and stupid word!

Not that he intended giving Prudence up. Oh no! Dashed if he wasn't half in love with her!

But meantime there was Jinny, who was maddeningly attractive, and knew all the ropes in a way the country maiden didn't. He had been crazy about Jinny at one time, and she still had a drawing power with him. . . .

In his beguiling voice he said, softly:

"Moonlight . . . and Virginia . . . and the scent of daffodils! Aren't they enough to go to a man's head? . . ."

The girl beside him gave a studied laugh.

"It isn't daffodils you smell, but 'Quelques Fleurs' direct from Paris at three guineas a bottle! I'd imagine that would touch a man's *pocket* quicker than his head or heart!"

This was disconcerting. Jinny's wits were much too sharp.

"A chap like me isn't in the running, I'm too poor, I know," said he ruefully. "But you can't blame me if, like the moth, I flutter round the candle, till my wings get singed."

She turned to face him in the moonlight, an uncompromising look upon her face.

"Whether singed or broken, those wings will always be quite strong enough to flutter off to lesser lights. You can't fool *me!*" she flung at him.

"You are cruel, Jinny! As cruel as you are beautiful!"

Young Traymore's voice had the low, vibrant note that seldom in the past had failed to touch her.

'Crocodile pathos,' she called it now, with a certain clarity of vision that recent events had brought about.

"I'm not cruel. 'Whereas I was blind, now I see,'" she quoted.

"See what?"

"More than you think, my friend." An enigmatic little smile flickered at the corners of her lips. "I use my eyes——"

"To deadly purpose. They're the loveliest eyes in the world, Jinny. I'll never forget the first time you turned 'em on me . . . clean bowled me over. . . ."

"Oh, you made a pretty good recovery," she retorted, unperturbed. "You've looked into lots of other eyes since then, and found a heap of charm in them. But what I mean to say is that I see more than you give me credit for, and I know what's going on, *sub rosa*. You can run with the hare and hunt with the hounds."

He had to smile at that. There *was* something like a frightened little hare about Miss Prudence, and Virginia *had* hounded her . . . or at least attempted to . . . on the day of the memorable garden-party when he'd found the shy country maiden almost on the verge of tears!

Aloud he said:

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Oh no, you wouldn't. The Bert Traymores of this world make a point of never seeing anything that's unpleasant."

At that, he leant towards her, one hand laid on hers.

"Buck up, Jinny girl! Haven't you always been first with me? And don't you flirt to beat the band, yourself, whenever the spirit moves you? Then why be so down on a chap because he's had a—a sort of spring interlude. . . ."

"Spring madness, eh?"

He laughed uncomfortably.

"Oh, not so bad as that. She's only a kid, Jinny. She's years younger than either you or me."

Oh, fatal blunder! *Years younger?* Had he really guessed, then? . . . She'd have a long, long look in the glass to-night, and woe betide Annette, her maid, if she hadn't got lots of the new cream ready, and the ice ordered from the village, and the things from town!

"I'm still in my early twenties, and can't pose as a Methuselah," she said, with an angry simper, "though, personally, I fail to see or understand this flapper fascination that's come over you."

"Come, don't be foolish, Jinny." Young Traymore slipped a cajoling arm about her waist. "You're so bright and amusing that you'd beat all the flappers in the world—"

Insult to injury! Had she reached such an age, then, that her sole charm was flippancy of mind and agile wits? *Good heavens!*

"It ill becomes an old lady like myself to be coquetting in the moonlight with a Don Juan!" She released the clutch, and the car started forward. "No—stop

philandering, Bert—I'm tired, and want to get my beauty sleep."

To his protestations she was deaf and dumb. A good thing to tantalize him! The fish he almost caught, but hadn't, was the one a man would rave about for weeks! It was time that Bert was brought to his senses, and made to understood her value.

"You've changed to me, ever since that Peter Armstrong fellow started fussing over you," said Traymore sulkily. He was in a mood for dalliance, and women didn't generally refuse his overtures.

Virginia's eyes widened.

"Peter Armstrong? Fussing over *me*?" (How too ridiculous! The boot had been upon the other foot.)

"Well, wouldn't any chap fuss over you, if he had the chance? And, if what a little bird tells me is true, you've given him several chances lately."

The girl laughed suddenly, and tossed her head.

"You mean when I took tea with him in his cottage, and another time we did an experiment together?"

Traymore nodded grimly.

"If you experiment too far, you'll maybe bring the whole show down about your ears. Remember Delilah, young lady, and go easy!"

"He's a very brawny Samson, anyhow."

She felt brighter now, though her quondam sweetheart still looked sulky.

"He'd certainly be all the better of a hair-cut, though I don't want to see *you* in the rôle of lady-barber."

"Oh, I admire him awfully." She stepped upon the brake as the front door appeared in view, and the

little car drew up with a grinding sound. "Run the machine round to the garage for me, Bert. I'm going straight in."

She ran lightly up the steps, and across the spacious hall. Once in the haven of her own room, she wanted adequate time for meditation.

The looking-glass had been her friend for years. It surely wasn't going back on her now, when most particularly she wanted reassurance!

Virginia found the push-button, and switched on the light. It flooded her pretty bedroom with a rosy radiance. She crossed the floor to the long cheval-glass which had an electric lamp on either side of it, and turned them on, as well.

What did she see?

A slender figure in 'correct' country clothes that had cost a pretty penny. A classically 'correct' face, with regular features, and complexion that—especially in this kindly light—looked perfect.

But . . . only to herself would Miss Virginia ever have harboured such a thought! . . . hadn't a certain 'dewiness' departed? Wasn't there a calculating hardness in the eyes and in the set of the perfectly-modelled mouth? When she was tired or despondent, too, it 'sagged,' marring its beauty, so that Annette's clever fingers had to coax the lines away with that new kind of cream that was so excellent for face-massage, and worked wonders. . . .

Oh! no trouble was too great if the queer, restless feeling in her bosom was a true one . . . and at last, after all her years of fickleness . . . *at last* . . . she loved a *real* man . . . worthy of a woman's passionate devotion. . . .

"If Peter Armstrong will but let me win him, I'll

know happiness I've never known before," said Miss Virginia to the lovely image in the looking-glass.

Chapter VII *Beauty's Martyr*

INDOLENT and self-indulgent in all other ways, Virginia was a stoic when it came to suffering for beauty's sake!

For instance —now— she would have given anything to have tumbled into bed, and slumbered.

But there were many little rites that she must go through, first.

Before ringing for Annette, her maid, she must perform those boring exercises that caused her figure to maintain its girlish slenderness.

(Maddening to think of the Page chit free for years of all such tiresome tricks!

Little did Virginia know that at the present moment, that same 'chit' was weeping her heart out for the very man Virginia had snubbed!)

The latter, then, arrayed in fascinating pink silk pyjamas, stood before the long pier-glass, and proceeded with the tiresome bending backwards, sideways, etc., that was calculated to foster lissom grace.

She must touch her toes twelve times in succession, too.

And there was the strenuous 'wind-mill' exercise, and a whole host of others to be gone through. . . .

Virginia was encouraged in the good work by acquaintance with a certain celebrated moving-picture star, famous for her beauty and svelte figure. They had met on boardship on the Atlantic crossing, and a

certain vanity in both had drawn them, temporarily, to each other.

The cinema queen, known the wide world over, had been the amazing product of self-discipline. Virginia had marvelled at the physical rigours she endured.

There was the meagre breakfast of hot water, varied occasionally by a glass of orange juice, and a scrap of dry, unbuttered toast. Eggs and bacon were anathema.

Following that, there was the three-mile walk on deck, another glass of hot water, and an hour's vigorous session with the trainer in the ship's gymnasium. Seated on that uncomfortable contrivance, the 'electric horse' (which was a cross-section of the real animal, fashioned of wood and leather, and complete with saddle!) the film-star would press the button marked 'trot,' and career for many figurative miles to the improvement of her physique. 'Canter' and 'gallop' buttons were in use, too. Indeed, one day Virginia, fired by the girlish one's example, had mounted the electric steed herself, and mistakenly had pressed all three together, so that the uncanny animal had actually *thrown her off!*

After a luncheon that would have been an insult to a robin, the film-star had reclined for a couple of hours in the ship's torture-chamber, known as the Electric Baths. Here she lost pounds in weight under the violent purple lights.

And not content with that alone, she would totter into the Russian and the Turkish lethal chambers, a dim shape in the steam that swirled about her, and endure further woes, not least of which was the pummelling of the masseuse, who concluded matters by playing a high-powered hose upon her at long distance, just as a fireman seeks to overcome a conflagration.

But the flaming urge for Beauty couldn't be extinguished in the film-star's breast. She was well past forty—(nearer fifty, if the awful truth were told!)—but when she entertained at tea-time in the Regal Suite (*one thousand guineas* for the six days' trip, that suite had cost her! but don't forget she was a queen in the 'movie' world, and queens always hire the Regal Suite, as any shipping clerk will tell you!) Miss Goldilocks wasn't a day over twenty-nine, unless tea were served in the Sun Parlour, and the light struck her at the wrong angle.

But, oh! at night! *That* was her triumph! Complete with adoring husband trailing possessively behind her, and with the admiring gaze of all the millionaires and millionairesses upon her, she would sweep into the dining saloon a half hour late for dinner, clad in a wondrous Paris gown . . . and at her entry, the clatter of the knives and forks would cease, corks and glasses would be suspended in mid-air, and down to the humblest steward every eye would gleam, and every mouth would gape.

For the long, strenuous day was closing, and the film-queen was a radiant, lovely, laughing Twenty. . . .

"A mere girl!"

"So beautiful!"

"My dear, did you ever *see* such shoulders?"

"Such hair! Such eyes!"

"A figure like a boy's—a Greek boy's!"

So it would go.

Virginia Dale was saying to herself:

"She's years and years older than me, if they only knew it. But they *all* adore her! Every man Jack of them! And every woman envies her! Then why not I?"

After that voyage she had hired Annette. Annette had been the film-star's English maid, and unwilling to return to Los Angeles, despite the cash inducement. She was proving quite a treasure, in her way.

Virginia rang for her now.

"Turn on my bath, Annette, and put in the reducing salts about three pounds of them. While the water's running, give me a face-massage. Did you get the new astringent? And did cook send up the ice?"

The paragon inclined her head.

"Yes, madam. Everything is ready."

Virginia reclined in a low chair and closed her eyes, the while Annette's clever fingers 'manipulated' the muscles of her face. Soothing it felt. This was one part of the beauty régime that she liked.

Her thoughts drifted off to pleasant pastures. To-morrow she would seek out Peter Armstrong. To-morrow she would further matters in that quarter. He already liked her, was attracted to her. She had every confidence in her own powers.

Unless—unless—that Page child should set her cap at him? . . . Hadn't he looked at the Page child with a curious expression in his handsome eyes?

But that was nonsense! She—Virginia Dale—was a thousand times prettier, and more subtle. She could capture any man she fancied!

Chapter VIII — *Prudence at the Ball*

PRUDENCE woke from her night of tears, not with the proverbial headache, but with a sense of exhilaration, as of a load that had been lifted.

'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.'

And outside her window, hadn't a little wren perched on the ledge of the gable, and over and over was carolling a song so loud and heavenly sweet that one must marvel such a tiny throat could compass it!

And happy starlings (Prudence knew them all!) were sitting in a row on the old cart-shed roof, whistling and chuckling and talking in that wonderful language of their kind!

The girl looked out of her gabled window at a new, enchanted world. The grass was spangled with a myriad drops of dew that gleamed like diamonds.

Over the orchard-trees she could glimpse the common, with its golden maze of gorse a-flower. Great sun-pits of it, in which the bees were humming busily. And—yes—she was sure of it, the first swallows were darting over the bushes as though they'd never been away at all!

"If I listen hard, I'll maybe hear the cuckoo call!" she said aloud, a-tune to all this riot of young beauty and returning life.

S—sh! There it was! In the high trees among the meadows!

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

She tossed her curly hair back from her eyes, and laughed joyously.

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" The bird was laughing at her, too . . . laughing because she'd been so ridiculously silly and woebegone last night, when after all Bert hadn't *really* meant to disappoint her!

There would be an excellent explanation, and it would come to-day!

"Pru-dence! Prue! Breakfast is ready!" came her mother's voice from down below.

Breakfast? Such a mundane thing as eating on a spring morn such as this!

But nineteen has a healthy appetite, and Miss Prudence, in a freshly-laundered gingham gown, was soon seated at the breakfast-table, enjoying a portion of eggs and sizzling bacon the very sight of which, at such an hour, would have caused Virginia Dale, that languid beauty, to wilt away entirely!

"Slept well, dearie?" queried Prudence's mother, casting an anxious glance towards her pretty daughter. (What *beasts* men were, to bring heartache to an innocent child like Prudence! Why, it seemed like yesterday that the girl was a toddling wee thing with a little angel face and lisping tongue! Even then, she had been capable of suffering intensely, as on the agonizing day her doll was broken! She loved so loyally, so truly, that the new doll couldn't take the place of that first love.)

"Oh yes, I—I slept pretty well," replied the girl, flushing a little, and hoping that the tell-tale tears had left no traces for these loving eyes to see.

Just then, the postman's quick rat-tat came to the door.

"A letter for you, dear," said her mother, taking in the mail.

A deeper red mounted to Prudence's cheek. It was of course from Bert. . . .

Ah no, it wasn't! But—it did bear the crest of the Towers.

"From Mrs. Vansittart, inviting me to a dance on Friday night," breathed Prudence, with eyes dancing like stars. "Oh, mother. My first dance! Isn't it thrilling?"

But her mother's face did not reflect her daughter's joy. She was 'afraid' for Prudence, afraid of this new clique so far removed from the girl's quiet walk in life.

"Mrs. Vansittart hasn't called on me. And I don't visit at the Towers. It isn't right, dear. They aren't your kind——"

"Oh, mother darling!" Prudence jumped up to fling her young arms round her mother's neck. "You wouldn't be a kill-joy, would you? You wouldn't stop me going, when you know how much I'd love it?"

"But—you haven't got a frock," the mother fenced, torn between a desire for her daughter's happiness and a fear that happiness wasn't to be found among this 'set,' "We're so short of money, dear, that we really can't afford to give you one just now—a suitable one, that is—— "

"Oh, mother! There's the lovely blue silk Uncle Joe brought home from China. You said you'd kept it all these years for me, didn't you? It's the exact shade of pale blue that suits me, and you and I and Miss Jiggs could make it up between us." (Miss Jiggs was the village dressmaker, be it said.)

The mother couldn't stand long against that coaxing tongue.

"Well, maybe we could make it up. You're easy to fit, and everything looks well on you. If your father says you can go——"

"Of course he will,"—in confident tones. Getting round *him* was an easy matter.

"Mr. Traymore will be there?" asked Mrs. Page later, trying to sound matter-of-fact.

Prudence flushed adorably.

"Oh yes."

"I—I'd like to see him, dear." The gentle mother gained courage. "I know this house isn't grand, but it's your *home*, and if the young man respects you, as he should, he would just naturally want to make the acquaintance of your family."

"Yes. Yes. He does, indeed. He's often said so." (Was it a fib? If so, the recording angel surely would forgive the quick instinct to defend her mother's feelings, at whatever cost.) "Bert would like to come. But—he's shy, mother. You know the way young men are shy, don't you?"

So no more was said at the moment, and the Chinese silk was unearthed from its long slumber in the attics, and Miss Jiggs and her enormous scissors snipped and cut and basted and draped, and Prudence—all a-thrill with joy—was 'fitted' for the grand occasion that was coming.

"Isn't that someone *whistling*?" asked Miss Jiggs when she and Prudence were alone, sitting stitching, side by side.

Prudence raised her head, listening intently. It *was* . . . *yes*! . . .

"Excuse me for a moment." Like a streak of lightning she had vanished through the open doorway, was across the yard and through the apple-orchard, running towards the sunlit meadow where the high trees grew.

There was a hollow there that was their rendezvous. . . .

"*Bert!*"

"Prudence, my darling! As fresh as a rose, and twice as pretty!" He caught her in his arms and kissed her. "No, don't be angry, sweetheart, about

last night. Little Lucia was ill, and I had to motor into the nearest town for that special medicine she gets. You're not on the 'phone, and there was no time to send a message——"

Prudence nestled into his arms, content.

* * * * *

Wyndham Towers was gay with lights and music and delightful frocks and the laughter of excited guests.

The ball was actually in progress!

Great banks of flowers from the hothouses were massed at one end of the dance-room, giving out a heady fragrance, and almost concealing the orchestra which had come all the way from London Town to grace the great occasion.

Coloured electric lamps peeped out from festoons of smilax on the walls, and dangled from long chains of flowers and greenery that were slung like ropes across the huge apartment.

The parquet floor was slippery as a sheet of ice, and 'gave' delightfully under the tireless feet of the dancers.

"Quite an Arabian Nights scene!" remarked an elderly, stout gentleman to Miss Prudence Page, who—with a palpitating heart and straining eyes—was standing, back to the wall, and gazing among the kaleidoscopic throng for one glimpse of HIM who had become everything to her.

"Yes, yes," she vaguely answered, searching feverishly. Where *was* he? Why didn't he come, when he *knew* that she was here?

"There goes the loveliest young woman in England," went on the complacent voice beside her. "The toast of town, Virginia Dale. A beauty, isn't she?"

"Yes, yes." A pang shot through the girl's heart at that name.

Virginia, in an iridescent gown that held every gleaming colour of the rainbow and that clung to her lovely figure like the fish-scales on a mermaid, floated by in the arms of Lord Cumbermere, deputy-lieutenant of the county, and the richest man for miles around.

He was gazing into her eyes in a fascinated fashion, to the obvious irritation of his stout, plain Lady who was standing near Miss Prudence, staring at the spectacle of her lord and master's enthralment with tight and angry lips.

"Old termagant, isn't she?" murmured the elderly man on Prudence's left. "But who can blame us old codgers for taking a little fling occasionally?" And he ogled Prudence in a hopeful manner.

But the girl was *dull*, he finally decided, after several fruitless sallies that misfired.

"Pretty - very pretty but not sufficient sparkle." ('Sparkle' was essential to his jaded palate.)

He moved off.

Prudence didn't even see his going, so intent was she on finding Bert. *Where* on earth was he? Was he ill? If he didn't turn up soon, she'd go straight to Mrs. Vansittart, who was fluttering from room to room like an hysterical peacock, preening her feathers and calling greetings here and there, and she'd ask where Bert was. . . .

The music of the orchestra had ceased, and a babel of tongues took its place. There were black coats round Virginia Dale . . . a whole bevy of them . . . and—yes—the set of one pair of slender shoulders and the shine of one fair head, smooth as a boot-button,

was like Bert's . . . if he'd turn round, she could see. . . .

"That young woman may have beauty, but she has no breeding," said the angry voice of Lady Cumbermere beside her. "In my young days girls were not so bold." She glared across the room at the enchantress.

With a sinking heart, Prudence felt that this elderly dowager and she were sisters-in-distress . . . abandoned. . . .

"Don't *you* care to dance, my dear? Or are you a wall-flower *not* from choice?" went on the tactless dame, with a sardonic smile.

"I—I don't know anybody here," faltered the young girl.

"Oh, *that* doesn't matter much. Men suit themselves, and if they take a fancy, up they'll come, introductions or no introductions."

(Evidently they hadn't 'taken a fancy,' thought poor Prudence, tense with humiliation.)

The orchestra struck up a lively air, and—as it did so—the crowd round Miss Virginia lessened, and the blond young man swung round, and—yes—he was Bert Traymore!

He stared straight across the room at Prudence, standing solitary by the wall, for Lady Cumbermere had already waddled off to the supper-room, and the young girl was alone.

"He—he sees me." No, he hadn't! Why was he frowning? Hesitating? If it wasn't possible that he wanted to avoid her, Prudence, his girl, his sweetheart whom he'd vowed he loved?

She couldn't stand it any longer, and hurried through the dancers towards him, overtaking him by the door.

"Bert!" Her breath caught in a little sound that was half laugh, half sob. "Bert! How funny! You didn't see me, dear- ---"

He halted, a queer expression on his good-looking face.

"So it's you, Prudence, is it? No, I didn't see you." (Gad! what an ill-made frock she'd got on!)

"But- but you looked directly at me, Bert. No, I haven't been dancing. I'm not sure if I could do those steps."

He stared at her critically, poised for flight, but uncertain how to get away. She read his thought, and a great lump rose to her young throat, so that she couldn't say another word, but just stand there in the doorway, looking dumbly at the man she loved.

A gold-toothed negro in the orchestra was chanting the very newest ditty. It had a peculiar applicability to her present plight. . . .

"Yo' gotta see yo' Sweetie *e-ve-ry day*,
Or yo' *can't see* Sweetie *a-tall*!"

A couple cannoned against her, so that she nearly lost her balance, and stumbled awkwardly against Traymore.

"Steady! You're in the way here." His tones were gruff.

'In the way,' was she? Yes, she knew it. Her face burned with shame. *Why* had she come where nobody wanted her? Her mother had spoken rightly when she'd said that these people weren't 'in her walk of life' at all. She was out of place, and even Bert—her sweetheart- realized it. The frock that she and her mother and Miss Jiggs had sewn with such care and

pride was 'countrified' beside the other lovely gowns, and out-of-date.

"I'll find a partner for you," Traymore was saying, in an irritated tone of voice. "Don't look so woe-begone. Here, Jones, I want to present you to Miss Page——"

"Sorry, old man, I'm booked yards deep." And Jones slid by, as slippery as an eel.

"Then you, Travis, I want you to meet Miss Page ——"

"Delighted, I'm sure. Now if you'll excuse me, Miss Page, I'll have to toddle off and find my partner——" Travis disappeared.

It was the last straw that broke her fortitude.

"And I, too, I'm booked, with Jinny, for this dance," said Traymore awkwardly. "Awfully sorry, Prue, but I must leave you. See you later on."

With a little sob of misery, the girl stumbled through the hall and out into the darkness of the night.

Chapter IX *A Very Gallant Gentleman*

PRUDENCE ran down the drive that led away from Wyndham Towers, like one possessed.

Burning humiliation, at that moment, quite eclipsed her pain over Bert Traymore's defection. Hateful people! Hateful house!

To get away from the scene of her mortification as quickly as possible, was her one ambition.

She swerved at right angles, making for a privet hedge that had a gap in it, through which she could escape.

With swift feet she crossed the lawns, praying

she might encounter no one. Oh, to be alone, *alone*!

Once through the privet hedge, the way was clearer. Prudence broke into a run. And then her foot caught in some trailing creepers, and with a little cry of pain she tripped and fell, the new gown tearing at the hem, and one bare arm with a great scratch upon it.

This was the last straw. Prudence wept in utter self-abandonment.

Oh, castles-in-the-air, for ever vanished! Oh, lovely dreams, that bitter waking had made null and void!

"I say! Hold on! Who's there?"

She started at the sound of a man's gruff voice, jerking herself upright, frightened. Was he a tramp? A robber?

No! He couldn't be! Tramps wouldn't be in evening clothes, would they? And this man wore his dress-suit so easily and gracefully that—misery!—he *must* be one of '*them*' . . .

"What's happened? Are you hurt? I thought I heard someone cry out." He moved right up to her, then gave a startled exclamation. "Blessed if it isn't the little girl I met down by the trout-pool!"

The trout-pool? Was this the man who had thrown Bert Traymore in the water? He had his back to the moon, and so she couldn't see the outlines of his face.

He was! That voice, gruff and yet wonderfully attractive, with a kindly, honest ring about it . . . one couldn't hate the voice, although she did dislike the man, big, burly giant that he was!

"I'm all right. I mean, I caught my foot in the creepers——" She turned her tear-blotted face away from the revealing moon, and tried to speak with ease,

though something still caught in her throat, making speech difficult.

"Haven't sprained the foot, have you?" His voice was very kind and reassuring. "I used to be a Rugby player, you know, and what I don't know about sprains and bruises isn't worth knowing."

"It—it doesn't hurt any more. I just got a fright, that's all." She was hatefully conscious of the tears still on her cheeks, and with a quick, surreptitious movement tried to wipe them off.

"Then that's all right. D'you know, I'm mighty glad I met you, little lady, because"—here he said a perfectly amazing thing—"because I've been busy fighting the blue devils, and I think heaven must have sent you along to me as 'second' . . ."

"'Second'? What is that?"

"Oh, backer up. The chap who gives encouragement. Honestly, I'm glad I met you, and hope you won't run away immediately, because I need your company."

He needed *her* company? She who, herself, had just been plunged into a bottomless pit of misery!

It was too strange, too utterly absurd!

She hesitated, then in a low voice she said:

"I'm not too happy myself. But if there's anything I can do—"

He answered gratefully:

"Why, if you'll stand by for a bit, and we can have a chat together, that would buck me up immensely."

Odd! Very odd!

Quite recently she had hated him—or thought she did—but now, *now*, there was something in his air that touched her, something in the queer crake of his voice, as though a lump were there. . . .

"You're Mr. Peter Armstrong, aren't you?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes, that's my name. And you're Miss Prudence Page, right out of the pages of a story-book."

She gave a wan little smile that touched his heart. He'd seen the haunted misery of her eyes, the tear-stained cheeks, though he was too innately chivalrous to embarrass this poor child by making any comment on that fact

"You've been at the ball up there?" He inclined his head towards the brightly lit mansion.

"Yes. But I I'm no good at social things." Her cheeks burned anew at the memory of that fiasco. "And so- - "

"And so you slipped out for a breath of air?" he supplemented quickly. "Well, others' misfortune is my gain. You're here to help me chase away the blues, and I'm going to make the very most of the occasion, before some indignant partner comes and carries you away. See?"

Giving her no time to explain her lack of partners and her lack of 'drawing power,' he went on:

"It isn't midnight, yet, and that pretty frock of yours is still a ball-gown, and not turned to rags, or I'd be tempted to think that you were Cinderella."

Prudence retorted, brokenly:

"I *am* a Cinderella, if you only knew! And so I ran away from the party - - "

He laughed outright.

"And the ugly sisters were delighted, eh? You left them a clear field?" There was definite meaning behind the light-spoken words. "Well, listen. I'm not vain enough to say that I'm Prince Charming — but I'm at your service, little Cinderella, and if I had

a glass slipper in my pocket, believe me that I'd fit it on!"

* * * * *

A certain warmth stole round the chilled heart of Miss Prudence Page.

From an unhappy little 'wallflower' she suddenly found herself welcomed and 'of count.'

The pain of Bert's defection eased its throbbing, as though this man's pleasure in her company were healing balm.

Was he really the same creature who had been so gruff, so brusque, on the occasion of their last meeting?

Never for a moment had she imagined that he was capable of pretty speeches.

But he was 'fooling,' merely. Yes, of course he was.

She shivered, so that suddenly he said, in a determined manner:

"Look here, I can't have you catching cold," and slipped out of his evening overcoat "You must wear this." Before she could protest, he had wrapped it snugly round her shoulders.

"But— but what of you?" she faltered.

"I'm all right." He smiled rather wistfully at her in the moonlight. "Tough as nails. Besides, even if I weren't, who'd miss *me* if pneumonia carried me away? Not a living soul, my child."

"*I'm* in the same boat, too."

"A lovely child like you?" He was still smiling, but incredulity had come to take the place of wistfulness. "Why, you haven't even *started* living yet! You don't know what you're speaking of."

"I do, indeed! I'm so unhappy that I—I don't

feel as though I could really bear it ——" And her lips trembled uncontrollably.

"Ah, that's youth talking. When you've lived a little longer, child, you'll understand we've *got* to go on bearing things, no matter how they hurt."

His voice was very gentle, now . . . quite different from the brusqueness of the other day. Indeed, Prudence could hardly think it was the same man talking.

"And no matter how one suffers, time is a great healer."

"You mean when I'm old and grey, and nothing matters, and all feeling for either pleasure or pain has gone for ever? Oh, I'd sooner be dead!" cried the girl passionately. "I don't want to live to be old. I don't want ——"

"Look here, child, maybe you and I can help each other. Suppose we go over to that rustic bench, and talk this out?"

She hesitated, wondering about 'conventions.' He misunderstood.

"You want to go back to the ball, is that it?"

"Oh no, *no*"—vehemently. (Anything rather than that!)

"Then don't be afraid of me, even if I have been fighting the blue devils all this evening. Misery needs company, you know" And he smiled again, his teeth a strong flash of white.

She walked with him to the bench, which was set in a fine gauze of green, with daffodils about it that nodded ghostly heads in this pale light.

A little silence fell between them, and then Prudence spoke, turning gravely towards her companion, as he sat beside her.

"I don't see how men ever could be unhappy, when it's in their power to shape their own lives to their wishes. *Men* are the lucky ones." Her young face held a bitterness her listener could not fail to note.

"Not always."

"Oh yes. Men can go out into the world, and lead the sort of life they choose, and win name and fame — —"

"For some woman to trample on? Eh?" There was bitterness upon his face. "Don't you know that the end of a good many 'careers' and men's high hopes are brought about by *women*?"

Prudence stared, astonished at his vehemence, and at the passionate conviction of his voice.

"But you—you said—down by the trout-pool—that you weren't a lady's man—"

He went on, as though he had not heard her:

"Suffering! A man's pain goes far deeper than a woman's, because he's got to hide it, got to play the game! And women are so cruel—"

"Not so cruel as men," defended Prudence quickly.

"That's all you know, you little ignoramus! Women are the cruellest creatures on God's earth. There isn't one of them I'd trust—not one—and with good reason."

Prudence, to her own surprise, suddenly felt a wave of strange compassion seize her for this man.

"You talk as though you'd been terribly disillusioned." (*Was* there a bond of sympathy between them, after all?)

"Disillusioned?" He laughed bitterly, staring straight ahead of him with set face. And then, as though he'd quite forgotten the presence of the girl beside him, in that curiously attractive voice of his, he

softly recited lines that to Prudence seemed immeasurably beautiful, yet strangely tragic:

"For nothing on earth is sadder
Than the dream that cheated the grasp,
The flower that turned to the adder,
The fruit that changed to the asp;
When the day-spring in darkness closes,
As the sunset fades from the hills,
With the fragrance of perished roses,
With the music of parched-up rills."

A lump rose to her throat.

"How very lovely, and how very sad! Whoever wrote it must have *suffered* so!"

And then a great light dawned on her. This man beside her loved some unattainable woman . . . beautiful and cruel and elusive . . . there was one who answered that description . . . yes, *of course* it was she, and none other! She had brought agony to Prudence, so why not to this man as well?

"You love Virginia Dale," said Prudence, a great pity and a great pain welling in her heart.

"What's that you say?" Peter Armstrong wheeled round on the seat. He had not caught her murmured words, and indeed no man would have been more amazed than himself if he had heard the statement.

But shyness took Miss Prudence, and a great shame at her own boldness. How dare she pry into his affairs?

"It was nothing at all." She flushed uncomfortably. "I- I just thought—the verse was so beautiful and so sad—that you'd once loved someone, and she hadn't been too kind?"

He grinned almost sardonically, with an odd twist to his well-cut lips.

"Kind? What woman is ever kind, unless she has some end to gain?"

(So he *had* 'seen through' Virginia, despite her beauty and cajoling ways!)

Prudence stammered:

"There are lots of nice girls in the world——"

"Child, you haven't *lived* yet, and you don't understand a man's urge for the one woman in all the wide world who to him is like the oasis in the desert—and when at last he thinks he's got her, then he finds out to his bitter sorrow that she's nothing but a mirage of his own imagination——"

He buried his face in his hands, and almost groaned aloud.

"I am so sorry——" Prudence forgot her own pain and disappointment, in her anxiety about him. (Wicked Virginia!) "Perhaps things may right themselves, if you will only give them time?"

He raised his head, straightened his broad shoulders, and suddenly rose to his feet.

"I'm a selfish brute, and I ought to be kicked for coming whining to a woman—no a child! And you have your own private worries, too." His voice grew suddenly gentle and compassionate. He put out a hand and drew Prudence up until she faced him, standing. "What do you say that you and I cast care behind us, and go up to the ball, and make merry, just to cheat fate?"

Prudence shrank back. A return to the scene of her defeat and humiliation was the last thing on earth she wanted.

"Oh no. I couldn't. They—no one *wants* me there!"

"Nonsense! We'll show 'em——"

"I—if you only knew—I hadn't any partners—and —and no one spoke to me—and I was simply praying that the floor would open and swallow me up!" she broke out, like a little hunted creature. She put out her other hand, and caught him imploringly by the arm.

"So they made you feel like that, did they? I'm not surprised. None of them are sensitive, and they expect others to be equally rhinoceros-hided! But surely Mrs. Vansittart had the decency to introduce you?"

"No. Oh no." Prudence's cheeks burned anew. "My frock isn't right. We—we made it at home—mother and Miss Jiggs and I—and—and I can't talk cleverly, and say sharp, witty things. I'm not used to parties. They—none of them—had any time to spare for me."

"And what about your friend, Mr. Traymore?" asked the young man bluntly. The wound must be cauterized quickly, if this child were to make a quick recovery from her woe. "Where was he?"

"Too busy to—to talk to me. He knows I haven't learnt the new steps—."

"So that's the extent of his friendship, is it?" Peter Armstrong's voice was now as brisk and bracing as a breeze from off the sea. "Well, what do you say that you and I show them what *we* can do? *I* was bidden to this party, also, but when I met you so unexpectedly I couldn't resist the temptation to 'give it a miss,' for dances aren't in my line. All the same, although I haven't any social graces, I certainly could steer you round the ballroom!"

A sudden thought came to Prudence. He wanted to go up to the ball entirely for *her* sake, to restore

her lost self-confidence, and make her feel happy again.

"It's awfully kind of you, but I'd sooner slip off home," she began, when he cut in with:

"Wouldn't that be rather—cowardly? Just think how vexed your mother, and the Miss—er—Biggs ——"

"Jiggs," corrected Prudence, with a wan smile.

"The Miss Jiggs who made the frock, would be," he went on cheerily. "Why, they expected you to be the belle of the ball in your new gown! And you will be, mark my words, if only you'll pluck up a little courage."

"Oh no." She had failed once, and didn't want to court a second disaster.

"Listen, child, and don't accuse me of being vain when I say that this time the lamb is going back accompanied by a *lion*! Yes, just because I've made a small success in my profession, and am rather in the public eye, they look on me as a *lion* to be exhibited, and to be made to roar! Laughable, but true, young lady! You needn't be afraid of any one of them, when you're with me, for the lion is a sturdy animal, and"—he grinned as though amused—"he's ready to do battle for you, teeth and claws!"

Chapter X — *Traymore's Spell*

VIRGINIA, lovely as a hothouse peach, colourful and blooming, held—literally and metaphorically—the centre of the floor at the Vansittart ball.

Men swarmed about her. Rafts of men.

She had a word for each and all of them. Gay titbits, flung apparently at random, but caught up by some eager swain.

"Reminds one rather of the seals being fed at the Zoo," said Janet Mercer with grim humour to her employer who had paused for a moment in the doorway to inquire about Lucia.

Mrs. Vansittart gave a hearty laugh.

"Apt! Very apt! Old Cumbermere, with his long drooping whiskers and lumbering antics, is exactly like a seal. She'll fling him another morsel in a minute. Watch him go off the deep end!"

It was not an edifying spectacle.

"What *fools* women can make of men!"

Well, she—plain Janet Mercer, guiltless of art or camouflage—had never had that opportunity.

Not that she really wanted it. Oh no. She was a 'one man' woman. If Will Ogilvie defaulted, then she'd die an old maid.

But—

Wasn't it the irony of fate that women such as Virginia Dale—with nothing in the world to recommend them beyond an artificial sort of beauty, and a certain shallow wit—should be petted and sought after and made much of, while the 'true blue' ones were overlooked?

Where was the secret of the 'drawing power' of women such as she?

With honest gaze, Janet fixed her eyes upon the siren. She disliked Virginia. But she would like to solve this problem.

Yes . . . Virginia was gay. She was laughing now, with an artificial tinkle in that artificial voice of hers. Men loved *gaiety* in a woman. Virginia understood

that fact. It chased dull care away, and made them forget their business worries.

Virginia was amusing, too. She had an answer, pat, for everyone. Even if her 'digs' were sometimes rather broad, hadn't most men a touch of vulgarity in their composition, which responded to the siren's 'chaff'?

And oh! with what a heavy hand could Miss Virginia lay on the flattery! Becky Sharp, ferreting out the weaknesses of each male character she came across, and then 'playing up' to them and catering to them, was nothing but an amateur compared to her successor!

"Bold young man!" she was cooing now at Cumbermere, who would never see fifty-five again . . . and tapped him playfully with her ostrich feather fan.

Lord Cumbermere felt devilish.

"If I were twenty years younger, I'd run away with you, Miss Jinny! None of these boys would have an innings!"

She flung a killing ogle at him.

"A man's as young as he feels, and I always did prefer men over thirty-five!" (By flattering implication, she knocked twenty years from off his lordship's age!)

"When I look at you, egad! I feel ——"

"Like you did the day your horse won the Derby!" supplemented Bert Traymore impudently, annoyed at Jinny's lack of interest in himself. "You always do back winners, don't you?"

("Maybe a wrong-un in this case!" thought Janet Mercer, grimly, in the doorway.)

The band struck up a tango.

Traymore bowed before Virginia, with an ingratiat-

ing smile. Here was *his* innings now. Few men could do this graceful dance with the measured perfection and the ease *he* had acquired.

He had a touch of Spanish blood in him. The queer, throbbing rhythm got into his veins.

And Virginia's court of swains and hangers-on stood back in a semi-circle, some to admire, and some to frown, and some to smile, and some to sneer.

Watching the couple -Traymore supercilious and assured, his partner with her head thrown back, and an ecstatic look upon her face -Janet could have groaned aloud for Prudence Page.

Prudence *loved* this Traymore fellow . . . this showman . . . this dancing puppet of a man!

Where was she now?

Janet knew all about the new blue frock, fashioned with, oh! such loving care. She knew of Prudence's high hopes for the evening.

But where *was* the girl?

"Breaking her heart for a cad who isn't fit to tread the ground she walks upon," thought loyal Janet, with a little stab of pain and anxiety.

At that moment, Mrs. Vansittart flitted by, pausing at Janet's question.

"The little Page girl? She's rather on my conscience! Haven't seen her in ages. Am afraid she succumbed to a fit of shyness, and ran off home! Poor child, in *such* a home-made frock! If I'd only known, I'd have willingly offered to give her one!"

"You'd better not." Janet reddened angrily "Her family's poor, it's true, but proud as Lucifer Prudence would have died of shame if you had suggested such a thing!"

But Mrs. Vansittart had flitted onwards.

"Where *is* the child?" puzzled Janet, much perturbed. She was very fond of Prudence, who, since her baby days, had leant upon the older girl's strength.

The tango had concluded, to the applause of the non-participants, and there was a sort of lull, followed by a buzz at the far end of the ballroom. A tall, dark, magnificently-built man had just come in, and half the people in the room wanted to talk to him, to meet him, to shake him by the hand.

"Why, it's Peter Armstrong, the famous inventor!" gurgled a young 'flapper,' grabbing Janet by the arm, and pointing. "*Do* look at the pretty girl he's got with him! The woman-hater has succumbed at last!"

With a look that was half astonishment, half satisfaction, Janet saw that Armstrong's 'girl' was Prudence Page!

* * * * *

By the force of his own magnetic personality, Peter Armstrong had transformed the shy young Prudence from a shrinking wallflower to a sort of little queen!

"May I have the pleasure of a dance, Miss Page?"

"I know your programme must be overflowing. But couldn't you just spare me the 'first extra'?"

"Do have a glass of iced coffee?"

"May I take you in to supper?"

"There are half a dozen friends of mine who want to meet you. Could you just spare a moment. . . ?"

These phrases, uttered by a variety of gentlemen of all ages, shapes and sizes, fell on Prudence's unaccustomed ears. The change, since meeting Peter Armstrong, had been so swift and sudden that the girl felt almost dazed.

But she was human, too, and in the midst of her confusion she felt a strange exhilaration and a deep gratitude to the kindly man who had proved a real knight-errant to a damsel-in-distress.

"I—I'm afraid I don't know how to dance," she would reply uncertainly to these many offers, looking up at Peter Armstrong for advice. "If you don't mind my making mistakes, I'm willing to try. . . . "

"That's the right spirit," her knight-errant whispered to her. Then, in a normal voice, so that anyone might hear: "And don't forget to come straight back to your chaperon—that's *me*, young lady!—when the dance is ended!"

So Prudence, in naïve fashion, had returned to her new-found champion every time.

They had not been left alone together for a single moment. Armstrong's friends and Prudence's new admirers quite surrounded them.

"Almost like a wedding couple receiving congratulations!" a fatuous youth tittered to Virginia Dale, who—pale under her rouge with envy and with chagrin—was glaring across the ballroom at the girl who, under Peter's banner, was now attracting more attention than herself.

"Little idiot! It's outrageous the way she's clinging to Peter!"

The fatuous youth giggled again, in a high falsetto.

"Oh, don't pity him! He loves it! She's mighty good-looking, isn't she?"

Virginia tilted up her shapely nose.

"For those who admire the dairymaid type, maybe."

"I say, d'you know her?" The boy was suddenly

eager. "Could you give me an introduction to her?"

This was *too* much. Virginia turned her back on him and walked away.

Just by the door she encountered Bert Traymore, who was looking all agog. He had just been told of the arrival of a brand-new beauty, and was hot on the quest. Bert loved to be 'in the swim,' and would have worshipped at whatever shrine was fashionable, or 'the rage.'

"Where is she, Jinny?" he blurted out, forgetful of diplomacy.

"Who?" The siren's voice was cold as ice.

"The new girl. Old Cumbermere told one of the fellows that she's just arrived, and is as pretty as a picture." His glance was questing round the room, and came to anchor on a bevy of black coats which formed a thick wall round. . . .

"Good heavens!" It wasn't. . . . yes, it was . . . *Prudence!*

"You'd better go and make it up with her, now she's become so popular! You're a time-server, Bert, and I hope she snubs you for the way you've treated her!" Jinny spat at him, and darted on into the supper-room where no doubt many of her cronies would be found, partaking of innumerable 'refreshers.'

Fickle creatures, men! Ready to run after any pretty face!

But what really galled was Peter Armstrong's sudden championing of the country damsel.

What on *earth* did he see in her?

One wouldn't have suspected that she was so 'deep.' 'Still waters,' of course, did run that way!

Sly little creature, playing the helpless kitten! She'd been cute enough to guess that big, strong men

had a certain instinct of chivalry towards all weaker things. . . .

Why hadn't she—Virginia—taken up that 'line,' herself?

Bert Traymore hurried across the ballroom towards 'his girl.' Hang it all! she *was* his girl, and he'd soon show all these fools who fluttered round her where the land lay!

Not, of course, that it wasn't flattering to his vanity to have her made a public fuss of. It put her value up, considerably. 'Nothing succeeds like success,' and at the beginning of the evening she *had* hung fire. . . .

All was changed now and he'd claim his own.

"I say, Prudence, you've treated me dashed badly. Where've you been hiding, all this time? I've spent *ages* searching for you." He had thrust his way through the wall of black coats and stood directly in front of the girl, who was seated between Peter Armstrong and that old ass, Cumbermere. "What've you been up to?"

"Casting sweetness and light on worthier objects!" rapped out old Cumbermere, with more acumen than he usually displayed.

"This is my dance, anyhow," persisted Traymore, offering his arm to Prudence. "Come, please"—and his bold blue eyes looked into hers, ardent, compelling, weaving the spell anew. . . .

The young girl hesitated, but his glance held her irresistibly, and slowly she rose as though hypnotized.

Peter Armstrong had championed her to-night after Bert's desertion. . . . Peter and Bert were at daggers drawn. . . . Bert had hurt her terribly, but Peter

had poured salve upon the wounds. . . . and yet . . . and yet. . . .

In front of all of them she rose and followed Bert.

* * * * *

The birds were twittering in the trees when Mrs. Vansittart's big Rolls-Royce deposited Prudence at the gate of her home, and Bert Traymore—more ardent than he had been for days and days—walked with her up the flagged path to the door, and kissed her good night and good morning with a gentleness that held a sort of shame and an apology for his treatment of her earlier in the evening.

" You did enjoy the ball, didn't you, Prue darling ? "

" Of course I did. It was too lovely– like a dream ! "

(Her generous heart had already forgotten the ' nightmare ' part.)

" Good night, then. And good morning ! "

Just as he stooped his head to kiss her, thrushes and blackbirds in the branches all about them greeted the rising sun in ecstasy, and down on a bush by the garden gate . . . that kindly bush which hid the lovers from the chauffeur's prying eyes ! . . . a tiny wren carolled its little heart out in a song of joy.

Something welled in Prudence's throat, and brought a glisten to her eyes.

" You do love me, don't you, Bert ? "

" 'Course I do, Sweetness. Cross my heart ! "

" Better than anyone in the world ? "

" Better than the whole world put together."

" And you won't change, *ever* ? "

" Never, Prue darling ! " (Dashed if he didn't mean it, too ! What a darling she looked, in this early light ! Such a test of beauty ! Quite disturbing !)

"I *am* your girl, always and always?" Her voice had an imploring intonation.

"Uh-huh!" Another kiss.

"Say it, Bert! Just say it!"

"You're . . . *my* . . . *girl*!"

(What a little child of nature she was, to be sure! And this rustic setting gave an added flavour to romance!)

"And—and you'll come in to-morrow afternoon—I mean, *to-day*—and meet my father and mother? They—they'd love to meet you, Bert." The big eyes were wistful and appealing. "About four o'clock, for tea?"

He disengaged her arms.

"I don't know, Prudence. It's difficult to get away——"

"To please me, Bert? My heart's set on it. And—and mother's always asking why you don't come!"

(So the wind lay in that quarter, did it? Bother the mothers! Virginia Dale didn't have such troublesome appendages! Why did Prudence have to drag her mother into the affair?)

"I'll come if I can possibly get away, sweetheart. Now, don't you worry. Everything'll be all right."

"I'll be expecting you." A little tremor of doubt had crept into her voice. She tried to keep it down. He loved her. . . .

"All right, Prudence. Now, I can't keep the car waiting any longer. You get right into bed and have a nice sleep. Good-bye, dear." Another kiss. Rather a quick and perfunctory one, this time.

"To-morrow, Bert? To-day, I mean. . . ?"

But he was off, clattering down the garden-path and through the gate.

She watched him drive away in the big, expensive car he loved to ride in.

If only, *only* she had money, she would give Bert *everything*!

But, in any case, caring as she did, she was just bound to make him happy.

When the car had disappeared, she went round to the kitchen-door, felt under the mat for the key, and quietly let herself into the house.

And not long afterwards she was sleeping the sleep of youth and happiness, with a smile upon her pretty face. . . .

"Did you enjoy yourself, my darling?" It seemed no time at all until her mother woke her, standing by the bedside with a loving, rather anxious look upon the features that were like, yet so unlike, her daughter's.

Prudence sat up, blinking and yawning.

"*Awfully*, mother, thanks. At first, just to begin with, I felt sort of shy—and awkward—but that passed. And—and then I had *heaps* of partners."

"I knew you would." A proud smile lighted the mother's worn face. "The frock was lovely, and so were you, my darling. It quite took me back to the days of my first ball."

Prudence answered all the questions with a happy heart. Bert was coming to-day. As she dressed, she could hear the chaffinches and the yellowhammers singing in the meadow: "He is coming! He is coming!" And she broke into a snatch of song herself.

"Why, it's nearly twelve o'clock!" Only four hours until the fated time! So much to be done! The best silver to be polished up . . . flowers to be

gathered for the table . . . a frock to be ironed out. . . .

At four o'clock she was waiting in the 'parlour,' nervously expecting the click of the garden-gate at any moment.

Bert wouldn't fail her a second time. He'd practically *promised.* And as for social obligations at the Towers, he was clever enough to dodge them, wasn't he? Trust him for that. . . .

Mother had on her best silk dress, too, and her hair done the new way that Prudence liked. The table looked lovely with that big vase of bluebells in the middle, and the best embroidered tea-cloth.

The hands of the grandfather clock in the corner pointed to ten minutes past the hour. He'd be here soon. . . .

Ah! There was the click of the garden-gate. *At last!* And Prudence, all a-thrill, rushed to a little mirror hanging on the wall, and patted her hair into position.

How light and quick his footsteps sounded, coming up the flagged path!

"I'll open the door, mother. You wait here"—and she was off to welcome her lover, and to bring him in, and introduce him.

With a radiant smile she flung the front-door open wide, to meet . . . oh! what *could* have happened? Why! it *wasn't* Bert! It was a *woman*! . . . her welcoming smile faded under the supercilious stare of Miss Virginia Dale!

VIRGINIA had come to reconnoitre.

She was no shy young woman. No, not she! She believed in taking fate in her own two hands—slim, white, cruel-looking hands they were—and wresting from the fickle jade everything her greedy soul desired.

A chit like Prudence Page wasn't going to disconcert *her*. No, of course not. She was too experienced a campaigner. She would find out all she wanted, skilful tactician that she was.

Even if cruder methods must be resorted to, Virginia wouldn't flinch.

And yet——

The stupid child was staring at her almost as though she were a ghost, and not a human being. It was going to be rather tiresome, this interview.

"Don't you recognize me?" queried the new-comer pertly, raising her eyes to Prudence on the step above her.

The girl nodded, but said nothing. She didn't even ask her to come in, or make any motion that might lead the visitor to think that she was welcome. *Dull*, these country maidens were! Odd that the chit had had a 'following' last night! Of course Peter Armstrong had been responsible for that. He was just the type of man to be sorry for the 'under dog.'

"Well, you don't seem overjoyed to see me!" She spoke again, this time in bantering vein, although an annoyed gleam sparkled in her eye.

"I was not expecting you," said Prudence quietly, and with dignity.

"Maybe expecting some one else?" The child *had*

a gala look about her! "If I come in, should I be spoiling sport? I'd hate to be a kill-joy."

With an effort, Prudence answered:

"My mother's in the parlour. If you would like a cup of tea——"

Prudence's mother was dazzled by the fashionable apparition. The parlour of the Green Gables hadn't seen such clothes in all its life before. And the scent of the wild flowers Prudence had plucked was completely overshadowed by the exotic perfume wafted from the beauty, which filled the small apartment like a sweet narcotic, heady, almost overpowering. . . .

Indeed, there was something overpowering about this gorgeously attired young woman. Mrs. Page felt the sudden change in atmosphere the moment she came in . . . a change that was not due to perfume, or to pretty clothes alone. . . .

"Mother, this is Miss Virginia Dale, from the Towers. Miss Dale, my mother." Prudence effected the introduction.

"Delighted to meet you, I am sure," gushed Miss Virginia, extending a patronizing hand. "What a charming, rustic place you have here!"

Her tone was such as the squire's daughter might use to the humblest cottager on the estate, or a high-born, philanthropic visitor to the denizen of an East End slum.

"Very different to the Towers," said Prudence's mother, glancing helplessly towards her child, who would understand better how to cope with the society lady.

"So restful!" gurgled Virginia, casting off her cloak, and at a quick glance taking in the general aspect of the room. No, not at all *bad* for such ordinary people!

Nothing pretentious, of course. But they'd spared her the horrors of crochet antimacassars, stuffed birds, wax fruit under glass, what-nots, and all the other accessories that folks of this class seemed to love!

"Won't you infuse the tea, dear?" Mrs Page was saying to her daughter. "We can get some made freshly for your friend, when he arrives."

"Ah-ha!" Virginia raised her head like a high-bred charger who scents the battlefield. "So, as I thought, there *was* a 'beau' expected, was there? And you wouldn't tell me!"

"My daughter has many friends, whom we are always glad to welcome," said Prudence's mother, distantly.

"Naturally!" Virginia's smile was very meaning. "The more the merrier!"

Prudence felt miserably uncomfortable. 'Undercurrents' were so hard to cope with!

There was pain, too, at Bert's second failure to keep a promise. Oh, where was he? Had he sent Virginia Dale to show her- Prudence—how little she counted in his life?

Then, as she made a move to go and get the tea, she saw—through the open window—Traymore coming up the flagged path to the door!

Every instinct in Prudence shrank from encountering her lover at that moment.

Virginia's advent had set her nerves jangling, and the whole world seemed out of tune.

Was there a plot on the part of Bert and the woman, to meet here, and humiliate her?

Or had he only kept his promise, because the 'charmer' had gone on in advance of him, and proved the magnet?

She opened the door in answer to his knock, dismally

conscious of flushed cheeks and a wildly beating heart.

His face was not propitious. He looked sulky.

"Well, I've come. Sorry if I'm late." Without shaking hands with her, he walked into the house, putting his hat and stick on the rack with a clatter.

"She's here," said Prudence dully. "But of course you knew that, already."

He thought that she was referring to her mother.

"Naturally she would be," he rejoined. "Haven't I come, specially to meet her?"

This was too much. Prudence was dumb with pained astonishment at his effrontery . . . and fickleness.

"I don't see why . . ." she began, but Bert caught her by the arm, impatiently.

"Come on. Don't stand there mooning. Let's get it over with."

"This way," said Prudence frigidly, shaking her arm free of him, and proceeding down the passage towards the parlour-door.

At that moment a peal of high-toned laughter caught his ear. He halted, frowning.

"Have you got a party on, or what?" Heavens! what a tangle it would be, if this silly child had told her mother any rot about an 'engagement,' and the woman had invited all the female relatives and friends to meet Prudence's 'boy.' (People in that class always did refer to their fiancés as their 'boy,' didn't they?)

Well, if there was a party on the *tapis*, blessed if he wouldn't run away at once! He'd frustrate their schemes to trap him into marriage, smart as those schemes no doubt were. He'd dodged plenty of mothers, in his day, and would continue dodging them.

"I told you already she was here," said Prudence in a trembling voice.

"Who?"

"Miss Dale."

"Good lord! *Virginia?*" He looked thunderstruck.

"Yes."

"You *asked* her?" (Heavens! It had been done on purpose! Prudence was jealous of Virginia, and wanted to show the other, once and for all, that he—Bert Traymore—was *her* pet property!)

"Why should I ask her? I barely know her," said Prudence, standing in the passage, looking up at him. "She—she's your friend, and not mine."

"Does she know I was expected?" the man asked hurriedly. Some action must be taken quickly. It would never do for Virginia to find him here.

"I don't think so, unless mother's been telling her. *I* didn't."

His face eased a little.

"Then I'll vamoose at once." (What *did* it matter what these country people thought of him!)

"You mean you'll go away? But why? Don't you want to meet your—friend?"

He wheeled round, grabbing his hat and stick from the umbrella-stand.

But at that moment the parlour-door was flung wide open, and Virginia herself stood in the aperture.

"Come on, faint-hearted Romeo!" she challenged him, with a little gale of laughter that was gibing. "I saw you coming up the garden-path. Don't run away."

He could have murdered Jinny at that moment,

standing there, laughing at him. Confound all women! All of them!

Behind her he could see an elderly, bewildered person, with grey hair and a prim 'best' gown. That must be Prudence's mother . . . in sharp contrast to fashionable Jinny . . . who was gaily making a mock of him before them all.

"I wasn't running away," he said stiffly. "I was only hanging up my hat."

"Quite prophetic!" giggled Jinny meaningly.

He walked down the passage and into the parlour, Prudence at his side.

"This is Mr. Traymore, mother."

"How do do? Warm weather, isn't it?" He tried to sound at ease. And then, turning with attempted nonchalance to Virginia: "S'prised to see *you* here, Jinny! Didn't know that you and—and Miss Page—were pally!"

She regarded him with an amused twinkle in her made-up eyes. What a slippery soul he was!

And what a coincidence that she should have come here to 'sound' the Page chit anent Peter Armstrong on the very day that Traymore had planned to pay his first authentic call!

Considering his past attentions to herself, Bert must be feeling pretty awkward. She was glad of that. It was a bit galling that he could transfer himself so quickly, even if she did like Peter Armstrong better.

Not, of course, that she really minded. But she would 'rag' him, all the same, for he deserved it.

Prudence had slipped away to get the tea, and the pair were alone with Prudence's mother.

"So you didn't expect *me* here?" Virginia repeated. "When the cat's away, the mice will play. Not that

you'll ever be caught, Bert, my dear fellow!" She turned laughingly to Mrs. Page. "This young man's a Gay Lothario. We call him 'the Flapper's Delight,' you know."

Simple-hearted Mrs. Page had not a word to say. 'Flapper's Delight,' indeed! He—he *looked* it! Oh yes, he was well-featured, and his clothes were well-cut. . . . but with such a foppish air! Prudence—her Prudence—loved this fellow . . . *why* had she ever let the girl go near the Towers? What happiness could ever come of the affair?

And wasn't this society beauty hinting that he wasn't in the least dependable? That kind, with the shining, scented hair and manicured finger-nails, and the 'haw-haw' manner, never were!

Prudence was back into the room again, and Miss Dale laughingly called out to her:

"Give him an extra strong cup. He needs it. He didn't expect to meet two sweethearts in one afternoon!"

* * * * *

Virginia's visit was an absolute fiasco, where Prudence and her mother were concerned.

Prudence had seldom known such utter discomfort as she underwent in having to sit opposite her lover and her rival, and hers lf feeling miserably 'out of things'—listen to talk in which she had no share.

Worse still, when Miss Virginia, with the baiting instinct given full play, deliberately showed up the girl's lack of knowledge of the world, her lack of travel, and her dearth of those accomplishments essential to a débutante.

"So you didn't go to a finishing-school, my dear!

But what a pity!" Virginia's eyes widened with assumed concern. Then, turning to the girl's mother: "But it isn't too late yet . . ."

"We couldn't afford it. Besides, it would only unsettle Prudence," came the honest answer.

"Unsettle? Why, it would be the other way round!" Here the tormentor smiled archly. "She'd 'settle' herself much better in life if she met the right class of girl. It would give her the entrée, as it were . . ."

"I'm quite happy," Prudence in desperation breathed, her words belied by her distressed young face.

"I made such *wonderful* friends when *I* was at my finishing-school," Virginia rambled on, with apparent artlessness. "Had the time of my young life——"

"That must have been many years ago," cut in Mrs. Page, feeling rather as a tigress does whose cub is being attacked. "It's different with Prudence. She's only nineteen, and has lots of time to finish her education in the way we'd like it to be completed. Judging by what the finishing-schools and ladies' seminaries turn out, though, it wouldn't be *there* we'd send her."

"One for you, Jinny!" Bert Traymore roared with laughter.

Virginia could have clawed him. She could have clawed every one in the room at that moment. Reference to the passing years was something that her vanity could not endure.

Besides, she scarcely looked much older than the Page chit. And she was twice as pretty, and ten times better dressed.

But of course this woman was trying to grab Bert

Traymore for her silly little daughter! And she resented Virginia's presence as a rival.

Jinny unsheathed her claws again, and with a dazzling smile remarked:

"I suppose if you did send her away from home, it would be to one of those commercial colleges where girls go who have to earn their living . . . typing and shorthand and book-keeping, and that sort of thing. . . ."

Bert Traymore intervened with a request to be allowed to smoke. Jinny was playing it a bit low down, he thought, but of course she did show up the poverty of the land. And Prudence's mother was really rather 'bourgeois,' in that odd gown, and that plain-spoken manner. Gad! he couldn't quite see himself in the rôle of son-in-law, though Prudence was a darling.

Such an ominous silence had fallen on the little party that he felt it behoved him to say something.

"Are you interested in motoring?" He turned politely to his hostess. "I was looking at new cars to-day, and trying to make up my mind which kind I'd buy."

Virginia giggled gibingly.

"You'd better settle your bridge-debts first." Then she, too, turned to Prudence's mother. "This boy has the *worst* luck at cards, but he simply *won't* leave them alone! It's in the blood, I s'pose. How much did you lose at poker day before yesterday, Bert? Ten . . . twenty pounds?"

Prudence's heart contracted painfully. Virginia was deliberately damning her lover in her mother's eyes. The girl knew what high standards that loving

heart set up for any suitor who might approach. Mother *never* would forgive Bert, if he gambled!

But he'd deny it, wouldn't he? Virginia was only *trying* to make mischief.

He spoke, coolly, nonchalantly.

"Yes, I do have rather rotten luck, but you needn't keep reminding me of it, Jinny."

"But it has its compensations," she flung back at him with an arch glance. "Unlucky at cards, lucky in love!"

"I don't see the force of that," commented Mrs. Page, with a cryptic glance at Traymore.

"Why?" (Virginia *couldn't* leave bad alone, but wanted to make it worse.)

"A husband who gambled wouldn't bring much happiness to his home." Prudence's mother spoke with a brave conviction.

Virginia's laugh rang out.

"But that wouldn't apply to Bert, as he isn't a marrying man at all!" She looked triumphantly, impudently, from face to face. Old Mrs. Page with set lips . . . Prudence flushed with humiliation and embarrassment. . . . The young fellow himself looking awkward, and as though he were longing for a favourable moment in which to clear out.

Then she added, breezily:

"And who can blame the men for wanting to dodge the matrimonial noose? None of them have any money, and unless the girl provides it, there's mighty little chance for a penniless maid, these days!"

Bert muttered something half inaudible about it's being hard on a fellow who'd like to marry, but the words echoed emptily, and with no conviction.

"I'll get you some fresh tea." Prudence couldn't

bear the strain of listening to this talk. She had lifted Bert's still half-filled cup and carried it to the door, when Virginia cried out, as though bantering:

"But you mustn't *spoil* the men, Miss Prudence. They don't ever appreciate it. They——"

Out in the passage a big, genial voice sounded unexpectedly, with a hearty:

"Here's *one* man who appreciates anything Miss Prudence might be induced to do for him!"—and Peter Armstrong walked into the room!

Chapter XII *The Letter*

PETER ARMSTRONG seemed to bring with him the fresh, genial breezes of a wider, kinder world.

Instantly, for Prudence and her mother, the atmosphere of the Green Gables' 'best parlour' changed, as though by magic.

"Exactly as if we'd been stifling, and then some one had flung all the windows wide open," Mrs. Page afterwards explained Peter's timely arrival.

She had taken an instant fancy to the young inventor.

"He looks you straight in the eye. And he talked to me for nearly fifteen minutes about his mother. Any man who's fond of his mother has plenty of good in him."

That had been her verdict.

As for Prudence, she was only human, and young Armstrong's words as he entered the room had been balm on wounds for her.

One man who 'appreciated' everything she did!

Virginia's face had been a study, at that moment.

Pleasure over unexpectedly seeing Peter. Annoyance that he should be calling on another girl. Envy that he had constituted himself her champion.

And, mingled with it all, the fixed determination that, if this Prudence chit had had a certain innings —pity being akin to love !—she, lovely Virginia Dale, would soon show her her true place, and the impossibility of holding any man's attention when a so-much-better-equipped rival was in the field.

But to return to Peter's entry. He had shaken Prudence by the hand, bowed to Virginia, given the barest nod to Traymore, and been presented to the mistress of Green Gables by her palpitant young daughter.

" Miss Prudence forgot her gloves when she left the party. And so I've brought them back to her." He produced a pair of long white kids.

Virginia giggled.

" Wearing gloves at a ball's quite old-fashioned ! "

Peter smiled imperturbably. He understood Virginia a good deal better than she knew.

" But I like everything that is old-fashioned." He turned to Mrs. Page. " You have a beautiful old home here. I was longing to rent it from you for this summer, but the agent held up his hands in horror at the bare idea. Said you wouldn't consider it for a moment."

Mrs. Page gave back his smile. It was infectious, somehow.

" If we'd 'let' it to you, we'd have had to turn out ourselves."

" *That* would have been a calamity." His glance instinctively went to Prudence. The mother saw it. Then :

"Perhaps one day you'll come and see my present quarters? Pear-Tree Cottage isn't a patch on this, of course, but it's a quaint little place."

So he was extending an invitation to Prudence and her mother, was he? thought Virginia angrily. All that talk about being a hermit and no lady's man was rot—pure rot! He'd been only trying to get rid of *her*!

"The last time *I* came to see you, you weren't so cordial." Jinny tossed her head. "But I s'pose *I'm* not sufficiently old-fashioned to meet your ideas."

Peter Armstrong gave a lazy smile.

"You came at the wrong moment, when I was conducting a rather dangerous experiment. And when I'm working, I don't invite ladies into the laboratory, in any case."

Came 'at the wrong moment,' had she? The casually-spoken words seemed to have a double meaning. Perhaps he thought she'd done it again to-day? 'Butting in where she wasn't wanted,' as Virginia herself would have elegantly expressed it, was a brand-new experience for the spoilt young woman.

She turned to Mrs. Page, with a snirk.

"Seems my ways are too 'modern' for poor Peter! But one would have thought an inventor, of all people, would be up-to-date, and always on the search for something new!"

Bert Traymore moved his chair to sit by Prudence. He loathed the Armstrong fellow, but he wasn't going to run away, a second time. And it *did* seem, oddly enough, that the chap was keen on Prudence. He'd made quite a little queen of her, last night, and now was on her track again to-day.

He'd 'get back' at Armstrong by being doubly attentive to Prudence. It would annoy that plain-tongued mother, too. The old lady had snubbed him on the gambling business, and he could plainly see she disapproved of him. Of course, that let him out of the *marrying* question, but it was a little galling, none the less.

"You haven't a word to spare for me to-day," he contrived to whisper reproachfully in the girl's ear. "I'm feeling hurt."

But somehow, Bert's crocodile pathos failed to register with Miss Prudence. She cared for him . . . oh yes . . . but she was still sore from Virginia's rude remarks, and from Bert's failure to please her mother, when, after all, it would have surely been so *easy* to be nice . . .

And he hadn't stuck by her in the way he should have done.

And . . . and somehow . . . Peter Armstrong's presence always made him, by comparison, seem a little 'trivial.' Subconsciously, Prudence sensed it.

After a vain attempt to cajole her, Traymore rose, and announced that he must be going.

"You'd better come, too, Jinny." He contrived, by means of a wink which no one but Jinny saw, to indicate that Armstrong had better be left alone with Prudence and her mother. "You can run me back in your car."

Virginia bade her farewells with a languid, patronizing smile, though inwardly she was furious at the turn of events. Prudence saw them off, a whole medley of turbulent feelings surging within her, chief of which was heartache.

After they had gone, she saw a scrap of paper lying

on the path, picked it up, and before she had realized it was a letter to another woman, had begun to read it.

"My darling Jinny," it commenced.

Involuntarily, and before she could stop herself, Prudence's eye ran to the signature.

And what she read was: "Yours always and forever, Bert."

Chapter XIII The Love-Tale of an Ugly Woman

JANET MERCER sat in her own tiny, chintz-bedecked sitting-room, trying to read the pages of a novel, but with one ear all agog for the sound of a tread she knew and loved.

Will Ogilvie had said he *might* drop in for a moment on his way home from the bank.

She had seen, alas! so little of him lately.

It was a pretty sitting-room. Odd that Janet, though always neat and tidy in her person, never seemed to wear really becoming clothes, herself, and yet understood the art of 'doing up' an apartment until it became a joy to the beholder.

For the past eighteen months she'd lived—between 'cases'—in the three rooms which constituted the ground floor of a small, rather ugly-looking house in the country town. Parlour, bedroom, and kitchenette. They were her pride and joy.

Her landlady lived upstairs. She never interfered with Janet. Indeed, the strong-featured nurse was not the type of woman that landladies dare to interfere with, much.

Nor did Janet encourage the good creature to much

gossiping. "Keeps herself to herself, she does," the latter said of her.

Janet sat in a low rocking-chair, and tried to concentrate upon her book. But her glance wandered round the pleasant apartment. It was full of flowers that little Lucia had plucked from the grounds of Wyndham Towers only yesterday, and given to her in one huge bouquet.

"Quite bridal!" Janet had laughed.

But the word made her heart ache, none the less. Would she ever *be* a bride? Weren't flowers incongruous as a setting for her own plain face and ungainly person?

She rocked gently to and fro, while a little breeze from the open window fluttered the pages of her novel. (Depressing trait that in most novels, the heroine *must* be beautiful! After all, don't we read books just to see our own lives reflected in them, our own problems, our own joys and sorrows? The 'human element' is everything. And, thought Janet, with a wry little smile at her lips, she herself was in such direct antithesis to the lovely lady in the story, that she couldn't visualise the beauty's way of life.)

Janet's feet were on a handsome Persian rug, the gift of a patient who had travelled widely in the East. Indeed, there were many expensive knick-knacks round about her.

But to-day Janet wasn't in an appreciative mood, nor could she—literally or metaphorically—count her blessings. What she did want, and want desperately badly, seemed to be slipping beyond her reach!

It was the thing that makes the world go round . . . the thing that beat about her, even in this country town, like the spiced perfume of poppies. That magic

thing created of laughter and tears and longing which some poet has so aptly termed 'bitter-sweet.'

"I'm nearly thirty. I'm plain and unattractive. I've no appeal for men." Janet rose to her feet, as though she'd shake the longing off. She gave a harsh laugh, knowing full well that even that laugh of hers was grating and unbeautiful.

Love! Cruel how it came so easily to some! Yes, while others would give their very souls for it, in vain!

Janet's friends would have marvelled, had they known what was welling in her heart to-day.

A home! Children!

But, ranking higher than either, and making her breath catch in her throat . . . a husband! An adoring husband in whose fond eyes she wouldn't be plain and unattractive, but everything his soul could wish for!

Dreams! Just dreams!

"I'm a foolish old maid," she said aloud, and walked straight into the bedroom to her looking-glass. "There, Janet Mercer, *that*'ll knock common sense into you quicker than anything will!"

'*That*' was the uncompromising vision of an honest-featured, though unbeautiful countenance, with small greenish-grey eyes that usually had a twinkle in them, but to-day held the look of a faithful animal that has been hurt. Hair nondescript, though neatly bound about her head. A pug nose that sat impudently, almost absurdly, in the wide expanse of her round, freckled face. And a wide, generous mouth, with an up-quirk at the corners.

Wasn't it the irony of fate that a woman who was yearning for a home and a husband and happiness—just like other women—should be so handicapped?

And wasn't it unfair how fluffy little misses, with no sense whatever in their heads, and very little real affection in their hearts beyond the pussy-cat variety that leads them to snuggle up to the hand that feeds them, purring . . . wasn't it unfair that *they* should be in the position to spurn love for which women like Janet would give their very souls, and count the world well lost ?

And it wasn't her plain looks alone that did the damage.

" It's that terrible tongue of mine," said honest Janet. " And the awful bit is that I don't seem to learn by experience, but go on saying the wrong thing, and the tactless thing, even if it *is* true ! "

She'd lashed out at Will Ogilvie's faults one day, and the surprising clarity of her analysis had hurt him terribly, by its very truth.

He'd kept away, since.

" And small blame to him ! " thought Janet, for she could see two sides of the question, and to a certain point could guess how he felt.

Would he come to-day ?

It wasn't likely.

At that very moment there was his rat-tat at the door.

" Oh, hello, Will ! " She made her voice sound casual as she opened to him, though her heart was throbbing in the bosom underneath the nurse's uniform. " I'm just off to Wyndham Towers. But come in for a minute, won't you ? "

He looked moodily at her, then said slowly :

" I've come to say good-bye, Janet. I'm giving up my job here, and going abroad. But I don't suppose, after what you said, *you*'ll miss me . . ."

Going abroad? Not miss him? Every throb that pounded in her chest tore loose a heart-string!

"I—I don't think there's time for you to come in. I'm a little late already for my appointment at the Towers."

Janet's voice, to her own consciousness, seemed to come from very far away.

But she mustn't let him know this agony. She . . . *must* . . . *not* . . . let . . . him . . . know! It was awful enough to feel this way, without the added pain and humiliation of letting *him* into the secret. . . .

"I won't stay but a minute, Janet." Was it her fancy, or was there a disappointed gleam in his dark, moody eyes?

But—if there was—it was just because *she* was taking the news so calmly (outwardly).

"No, Will." She must have air to breathe. She'd suffocate inside the little house, inside the little room that was full of memories of his presence.

He spoke again, unsmiling.

"I'm sorry I called, since you think my last visit is so unimportant. But I might have known it."

There was bitterness in his tone, and resentment.

She contrived to shake out a tremulous laugh. Pride! Pride! She'd make it win the day.

"One's duty has to go on, even if friends must go away. Be sensible, Will."

He regarded her sullenly.

"Oh, I've come to my senses, right enough. Don't worry."

"Then—just wait till I get my cloak and case, and walk with me to the bus, will you? I—I want to—to talk to you——"

She prayed that he hadn't heard the catch in her

voice as she turned away from him and hurried to her bedroom. To the last, she'd keep her flags flying, even though it killed her.

Going away! The whole sunshine of life to be removed from her! It was incredible! Impossible!

But Janet Mercer, in her uphill life, had trained herself by stern necessity to a Stoic calm.

The Stoicism was for outward seeming. Inwardly, there was chaos . . .

Will Ogilvie walked beside her to the bus. In his own way, he was as plain as she, but the homely, sallow face was redeemed by fine dark eyes.

Unfortunately, they were nearly always moody. Fate 'had a down' on him. The good things of life didn't come his way, he thought.

Janet Mercer loved him with a love that had a tremendous amount of the maternal in it. To her, he was ever the little boy to be consoled and mothered, and, if need be, lectured and corrected.

There was woman's love in it, as well. Ogilvie little realized the depth of it.

Now, as she walked beside him to her bus, an analytical passer-by who caught her 'off guard' for a moment might have seen a picture of the heartache and the loneliness and the tortured bravery of every discarded sweetheart, every neglected wife, the world over.

"When do you leave the country, Will?" In Janet Mercer's small grey-green eyes there was nothing but sheer anguish, had the man beside her only seen it.

"Oh, the first moment the bank'll let me go."

"A-ah!" The ejaculation escaped her. So there *might* be hope, still, one tiny grain of hope? . . .

"You—you haven't given in your—your official resignation—*yet*?" (Pray Heaven there was no tremor in her voice! To show one's feelings was not only sheer humiliation, but it would kill that tiny speck of hope, if Will but heard it!)

"No. I—I thought I'd tell *you* first. Not that you care, Janet, what becomes of me. But"—with rising passion in his tones—"a country that can't do any better for a fellow than keep him tied down as a bank-clerk to the age of thirty-two—well—it's no good to anyone! I'm through! I'm off!"

"And what about your mother, Will?"

His mother had been a fruitful source of controversy, hitherto, for the older woman was bitterly jealous of her son's 'friendship' with the younger, and had done her best to come between them.

But now Janet snatched at this tie that might detain him.

He turned resentfully on her.

"Why should I ruin the whole of my life for *women*?"

"It'll break your mother up, Will . . . your going away . . ."

"Little you care. You and she never did hit it off. Mighty uncomfortable it's been for me, many's the time."

Janet reddened in humiliation, and flared up.

"You needn't flatter yourself that *I'd* fight over you. Your mother's welcome to the whole of you, and you can tell her so."

He answered moodily:

"Oh, I always knew that well. It's one reason why there's no need of my staying. Your not wanting me, I mean."

The anger died down quickly. Did he *want* her to 'want' him? Was it possible? . . .

"Oh, Will, how can you say such things? Doesn't our—our friendship mean anything to you? Don't you understand?"

"Frankly, I don't pretend to understand any woman. No man ever does." His tone was mollified, all the same.

They reached the bus, and, to Janet's surprise, Will got in beside her, announcing that—as he would be leaving the country so soon—he might as well take this opportunity of a talk with her.

He was strangely silent, none the less. And when the bus deposited them at the cross-roads about a mile from Wyndham Towers, and they walked along together, it was Janet who perforce had to do most of the talking.

Her heart was still heavy in her breast. What *pain* love brought with it! That was love's penalty.

Perfume of spring flowers floated towards them from the meadows, and in the trees there was the drowsy twittering of birds.

"It's little Lucia's bed-time. I must hurry." Reluctantly the nurse quickened her pace.

Will Ogilvie walked along in silence by her side. Several times, he seemed on the verge of bursting out with something, but bit his lip to silence.

As they neared the lodge gates, they saw the tall figure of a man walking down the drive.

"Thank goodness! it's Peter Armstrong," cried Janet, relieved. "He's been up at the house, with Lucia, telling the child stories, and keeping her amused. That man's an angel!"

"He is, is he? Well, if you'd like to hear the reason

why I'm clearing out of the country, it's because you think like that of *him*. There's no room for failures like me beside men—like—like——"

"Will! Will, my *dear* boy!" A light of astonishment, huge relief, and almost comic bewilderment shone on the face of Janet Mercer. So *this*—this was the explanation . . . heavens! Will Ogilvie, the man who held the whole of her passionately loving heart, was jealous—stupidly, adorably, blessedly *jealous*—of another man!

* * * * *

Janet's breath was completely taken away!

It was so utterly ridiculous. So entirely stupid.

And yet—and yet her heart was hammering in her bosom with a huge relief, a blissful, almost incredible hope!

For jealousy cannot spring into being in conjunction with indifference. Jealousy implies *love*. Yes, even although stern moralists and idealists assure us that true love casts out jealousy as unworthy and degrading.

"Will loves me after all!" rang in Janet's brain like bells of music.

Meantime, Peter Armstrong, all unknowing the storm he'd caused, was striding down the drive towards the approaching pair.

"I won't come any further, Janet. You—you'll want to be alone with him, I'm sure." Despite the gruff, surly utterance, Janet caught a boyish break in Will's voice that completed all she wished to know. "I'm off."

"You're nothing of the sort, you silly creature!" In full view of the unwitting 'disturber of the peace,'

she caught Will's arm, and hung on for dear life. The temptation to burst out laughing over the bare idea of Armstrong being 'interested' in herself must, at all costs, be withstood.

"I never did have enough feminine arts and wiles," thought Janet, humorously, suppressing an almost uncontrollable impulse to giggle heartily over the present 'impasse.' "But if I laugh at Will—and dear knows the best of men *hate* to be laughed at!—I'll not only make him angry, but I'll put myself outside the pale of the women who keep their lovers just a teeny bit *uncertain* of them by having an occasional 'other admirer.' My goodness! Didn't I tell Prudence Page how stupid *she* was to give her whole heart openly to anyone? And now I'm ready to make the same blunder a second time, when a perfectly good weapon has turned up to help me!'

Not that Janet had the least intention of deceiving Will. Oh no! Nor would she make a fool of herself by attempting coyness with young Armstrong! She had common sense, and used it.

Still, there was nothing to be gained by assuring her sweetheart that no other man had ever looked in her small grey-green eyes and found them beautiful.

"Oh, is that you, Miss Mercer? Lucia's waiting for you." And Peter Armstrong's breezy voice cut into the silence that had fallen on the lovers.

No greeting could have been more matter-of-fact or unemotional.

But love is blind. And Will Ogilvie indeed imagined that the inventor had only hung about the big house in the hopes of a meeting with little Lucia's masseuse.

"Sorry I'm late," cried Janet, not stopping on

her way. "I hope the child isn't in much pain to-day?"

"Oh, so-so." Then, vehemently: "It's a blot on the world that children ever have to suffer pain!

"Queer chap!" commented Will Ogilvie, when Armstrong had passed on. He gave Janet a quick, sidelong look. *Had* she encouraged him?

"A very fine fellow!" was her ready answer.

"Oh, I know you've thought *that*, for some time."

"Well, who wouldn't? Hasn't he worked hard, and earned his meed of praise? Look what he's doing in the interests of science? Look at the fame he's already got!"

Will muttered something about others working just as hard, and more so, and getting no recognition.

"Oh, we all work hard," said Janet airily, fighting the temptation to assure him that—success or failure—she was *his*, always, and wanted nothing more from life.

The young man's face had a look of sullen pain about it.

"If I had my way, you wouldn't have to work at all, Janet."

She contrived a light laugh, although her voice had a tremble in it as she said:

"My dear, I'm not born to be an ornament, or a lily-of-the-field. I'm not decorative enough. So don't take the only thing that's left, away from me."

He grabbed her hand.

"Oh, Janet——"

"What is it, Will?"

"If you only cared in the least little bit about

"About what?" (He *did* love her, after all! Pain

had slipped away for ever, and only a great gladness reigned in the world to-night.)

"About my going away. You—you take it so—so gaily!"

"Well, as Shakespeare or some writer-person has it, isn't that the only way to take the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'?"

"'Outrageous'? You—you mean it *would* hurt you—my going away?" That finest feature of his homely face—his eyes—dark, rather tragic orbs they were, and moody—were filled with the light of hope. "You'd really miss me, Janet? Would you?"

She tossed her head exactly in the fashion of a pretty, much-sought-after woman. Risky, these tricks were, but Will had hurt her so frequently, of late, that he didn't deserve to be reassured too soon!

"Oh, the grand old world 'ud keep on turning, just the same, even though *you* were on the other side of it, and fourteen thousand miles away!"

"Then you *have* got some one else? I knew it!" he flung at her. "Oh, Janet . . . it's unbelievable!" His voice broke.

Then he added, passionately:

"I'm through with women. I'll never look at another one again. To-morrow morning I'll hand my resignation in at the bank, and go right ahead with my arrangements, and nothing- not even you--will stop me——"

He looked so like a little boy at that moment—an angry, pathetic, disappointed little boy—that Janet had great ado to maintain her present rôle of cool detachment.

She managed it, however.

With widened eyes she asked:

"But didn't you tell me that all arrangements for leaving were already made? What's been keeping you?"

He stopped at a bend of the avenue, close beside a Lombardy poplar whose branches made an eery sighing, almost like a sob.

"*You*, Janet! I—I cared for you—and I—I thought you reciprocated——"

She faced him, hidden from the big house by a thick wall of trees.

"Don't you think when a man is always doubting a woman, and keeping away from her, and making her unhappy, that she wouldn't be rather a fool to let herself go on caring?"

He caught her hand so tightly that, had she not loved him so, she would have cried aloud in pain.

"You—you did care, then, Janet?"

Her control snapped. Tears brimmed over.

"Will, you—you goose! The thought of you going away hurt so—so terribly—that I just couldn't speak about it! And—and let me tell you this"—a smile glimmered through the tears, just like a rainbow—"if you do go away to the ends of the earth, you won't get rid of me! *I'm coming with you!*"

Chapter XIV — *Virginia is 'Caught'*

WHEN Miss Virginia Dale deliberately dropped the love-letter written to herself by Bertram Traymore, knowing full well that Prudence would be sure to find it, and that it would add a further wound to a tender, loving, girlish heart, she felt a certain degree of satisfaction in the despicable act.

But that satisfaction was tempered by extreme annoyance over Peter Armstrong's attentions to 'the chit.'

What the brilliant young inventor saw in Prudence Page 'beat' Miss Virginia absolutely!

"Insipid child!"

"Sly little cat!"

"Little Miss Innocence, who wouldn't say 'bo' to a goose, and yet try and grab every man who came along!"

These were a few of the names Virginia called her unconscious rival.

What *could* he see in Prudence that she—lovely Virginia—lacked?

Youth?

But none of them knew Virginia's real age, thanks to the services of her clever maid, to her own systematic dieting, massage, rest, cosmetics, and all the tiresome ritual she underwent, in the name of youth and beauty!

Dew on the grass?

There *was* a dewiness about the Prudence chit. A large-eyed candour, as it were, that somehow 'got' the men. A freshness of appearance and of manner that made one think of apple-orchards in the early dawn, dew-bespangled grass, and birds twittering in the branches.

These poetic images were not the children of Virginia's brain; but subconsciously the idea of Prudence and spring-time in conjunction did flit through her mind.

She was rather silent on the homeward run with Traymore.

"Whatever made you call on the Page family?"

queried the latter, as Jinny's car flew over the country roads towards Wyndham Towers.

"Curiosity, I s'pose," she said laconically.

Traymore grinned.

"Curiosity killed the cat, didn't it?"

"I suppose *you* thought when the cat was away, the mice could play," she retorted, with attempted humour.

He laughed boisterously.

"That isn't up to your usual level of wit. You're becoming banal, Jinny."

"A back-number, maybe!"

"Never!" He touched the hand that was free of the steering-wheel. "You knock spots off the lot of them, you do!"

"Poetically spoken, Bert." She gave a crooked smile. And then she added, suddenly:

"I don't imagine Peter Armstrong thinks so."

"Armstrong? Bah! The chap gives me a pain." At mention of that name, however, Traymore looked embarrassed. Though Jinny knew nothing of the matter, he hadn't got over the summary ducking in the trout-pool . . . and he *hated* the man who in every way had proved superior to himself. It had been dashed awkward meeting him that afternoon, although a sort of truce had been upon the *tapis*.

"If you were half the man Armstrong is——" began Miss Jinny, below her breath, and then thought better of it. Traymore was her 'beau,' and was quite useful. No use to antagonize him. And of course, criticism was the one sure way to lose an admirer, tempting though it was.

Luckily, Bert hadn't heard the broken sentence.

The car drew up at Wyndham Towers, and Jinny

went into the drawing-room to write some letters, telling Traymore to run away and amuse himself.

He found a kindred spirit in the billiard-room, and proceeded to play 'a hundred up.' He was a past master at this sort of thing. Billiards, poker, bridge, he was an adept at them all.

Meantime, Virginia in the drawing-room was busy with her letters. She had to keep in touch with various out-of-sight admirers, for fear that they dropped off. 'Out of sight' usually meant 'out of mind' . . . at least, it was so with herself, and she usually credited others with her own failings.

"'lo, Miss Jinny! Tell me story." Little Lucia had limped into the room, and stood beside the desk, her big eyes upturned pleadingly.

"No. Run away. I'm busy," rapped out Virginia, who disliked children, and especially Lucia, who suffered from the unforgivable thing, a physical deformity. Lucia's little face, had it not been so peaked with pain, would have been pretty. But her spine wasn't straight.

So Lucia limped away, back to her nursery, disappointed. Lucia adored all beauty, and she wished that the lovely lady would have let her stay with her a little, just for the sheer joy of looking at her.

Virginia finished her correspondence, then went to her own room to take a 'facial pack,' so that she might look her best at dinner-time. The 'facial pack' was nothing but specially-treated mud which Virginia smeared upon her face, thickly, letting it stay on for half an hour.

It pricked a bit, 'drawing' the skin, and stimulating it, and—after it had caked on hard, as it was meant to do—it was rather a job getting it all off with hot water.

But the process, though awkward and a trifle painful, really did give fine results. Virginia's complexion, glowing like a rose, emerged triumphant from the mud pack.

She smeared it on, now, with a heavy hand, squeezing large quantities out of the tube. Those lines that threatened to show around the mouth must be got rid of!

Then she lay down upon the bed, relaxing every part of her body, as per instructions, while the thick mud on her face started to smart and harden.

Ten minutes later, a clock striking the hour warned her that time was speeding.

Before removing the mud, she'd slip along the passage to her bath. At this hour no one was about. . . .

Virginia cautiously opened the door, peered round, and then—armed with immense sponge and towel—proceeded down the corridor. She was almost at the bathroom door, when she heard a sudden scream in a child's frightened treble, and saw little Lucia staring at her from a corner.

"Black-faced lady!" cried Lucia, backing away, and not in the least recognizing the former beauty.

"Don't be silly!" hissed Virginia sharply. "And don't you *dare* tell anyone you've seen me like this ——"

Before she could complete her injunction, Peter Armstrong, in his stockinged feet,—for he was playing hide-and-seek with his little friend Lucia—swung round the corner and confronted the weird and mud-encrusted apparition! . . .

Peter Armstrong to have caught her in this awful plight!

Virginia could have screamed in fury and embarrass-

ment. She could have slapped Lucia, whose startled cry had brought this man here, to witness her—Virginia's—disfigurement.

But of course he didn't recognize her. Her face was as black as any chimney-sweep's. The mud lay half-an-inch thick upon her nose, her cheeks, her chin, her forehead. Every scrap of hair was dragged up tight under a hideous rubber bathing-cap, the sort that Virginia would have scorned to sport upon a bathing-beach!

Even her kimono—because of the recent mud-treatment—was her third-best, and a sight!

"Black-faced lady!" screamed little Lucia again, and flew like a frightened pigeon into the arms of Peter Armstrong. "Black-faced lady very angry with Lucia!"

Now if anything in the world could infuriate Peter Armstrong, it was unkindness to a child . . . particularly a delicate, helpless little creature like Lucia, who —rousing all his protective instincts—had hurled herself, sobbing and trembling, into his arms. He could feel her small heart throbbing like a terrified fledgling's in her thin, childish bosom, up against his coat.

And he had heard Virginia's hissed threat, and recognized the voice.

In the first unreasoning moment, he thought the girl had done herself up in this guise, purposely to torment poor little Lucia.

But one square look at the astounding apparition made his anger die away, and a gale of sudden laughter take its place. Good heavens! not even on the music-halls had he seen such a sketch! Not even on Hallowe'en had any black-faced 'guiser looked as weird as this!

Before he could say one word, or even try to soothe Lucia, the apparition had flung itself into the bathroom, locking the door violently behind it.

"Hush, Lucia! It's all right! Just a little joke! Come, stop trembling and crying!" Peter Armstrong carried her back to the nursery, stroking the curly baby head.

But Lucia—that passionate lover of beauty—wouldn't be easily comforted. She hadn't recognized Virginia's voice, and never for a moment connected the appalling black-faced vision with the pink and white and golden beauty of her mother's visitor.

"Listen, now, and I'll tell you a story." That magic charm never failed to work, as Peter knew.

"About a lovely princess," chirruped Lucia, the storm suddenly abating.

"With golden locks and big blue eyes," supplemented Peter in his charming, well-bred voice, smiling down at baby Lucia. How easily children's tears were dried! Pity that grown-ups couldn't be the same. *Their* tears bled inwardly. . . .

"Golden locks and big blue eyes," repeated Lucia rapturously. "Just like Miss Jinny." Then her little face clouded over. "But Miss Jinny always cross with Lucia. This princess wouldn't be cross with Lucia?"

"No, oh no." (Odd how children gauged intuitively the characters of grown-ups!)

"The black-faced lady cross with Lucia, too . . . just like Miss Jinny," prattled on the child. Her little brain was working, vaguely, with an idea.

Peter didn't want the idea to develop.

"You just forget about that, and listen to my story, will you?"

Lucia moved restlessly on his knee.

"Back hurts. Want rubbing. Want nurse to come." Her thoughts were off on Janet Mercer's track.

"Nurse will be here soon, if you're a good girl, and stay still, and listen to the tale about the princess."

His magic voice at last soothed the child, and presently she lay still, as though hypnotized, her pain forgotten.

Meantime, locked in the bathroom, Virginia stared in fury and in horror at the vision of her own mud-bound features.

"He *couldn't* have recognized me!" she repeated over and over to herself, as though trying to gain reassurance from the assertion. "Unless that brat of a Lucia told him! How I loathe the child!"

It was only an hour ago that she—Virginia—had left Peter Armstrong at Green Gables, little thinking that he would follow her so speedily to Wyndham Towers. (Flattering that he *had* followed her so soon, and doubtless most disappointing for Prudence Page! But the whole thing would be ruined if he'd recognized her, looking such a shocking guy! It would be difficult to again convince him of her beauty.)

Virginia, however, had long since discovered that worry was a sure and potent destroyer of said beauty. So she forced herself to believe what she wanted to believe; namely, that her identity in the mud episode was an absolute secret.

She bathed and dressed rapidly, emerging from the process radiantly lovely, and sought for Peter Armstrong in the nursery. A woman she heartily disliked was there.

"Are you looking for anyone?" inquired Janet Mercer coolly.

Virginia hesitated between a desire to snub the upstart creature and a desire to learn Peter's whereabouts.

"I wanted to speak to Mr. Armstrong," she said finally, looking down her dainty nose at Janet, with an insolence peculiarly her own.

"He's gone. I met him near the lodge gates, going away." Janet could hardly repress a smile at the recollection of Will Ogilvie's jealousy anent the unconscious Peter. Janet was feeling very, very happy now. No insolence on the part of this haughty beauty could dim that *joie-de-vivre*. Her lover was her own again, her very own!

Virginia swept out of the nursery in search of Mrs. Vansittart. Perhaps Peter had inquired from the lady of the house anent the whereabouts of his charmer?

But no, he hadn't!

"Do stop trying to cast a spell over every man you meet, my dear Jinny!" Mrs. Vansittart rallied her, teasingly. And then she added:

"It's my belief that the little Page girl has fascinated the woman-hater! Youth and innocence, you know! It works wonders!"

"Well, haven't *I* got both? What are you insinuating?" Jinny blurted out, with a twisted smile.

"H'm! I hate to be a critic, but I shouldn't bank on them too heavily in your case!" came back the maddening answer.

THERE are many types of women in the world. There are many shades and grades of character. But in matters of the heart two kinds stand out. The woman—hard and self-absorbed and greedy—who grabs everything she can, and gives nothing in return, —or anyhow, the minimum. And her ardent, whole-hearted antithesis to whom love is everything, and who is generous to a degree.

Of the latter type was Prudence Page. A born lover. Contrary to her name, she loved, perhaps not wisely, but with a whole-hearted devotion that women of the stamp of Miss Virginia Dale could never hope to understand, nor would they want to, in their selfishness.

Even as a tiny tot, Prudence had loved devotedly. Her mother, her dolls, the tiny animals about the farm.

"That child's head will never govern her heart," an observing neighbour had remarked.

"I wouldn't have her different for the world," the fond mother had replied.

Now, however, she was 'afraid' for the warm-hearted little daughter. With reason, too. Her own worldly experience might be small, but one really didn't need experience to sum up Mr. Traymore! Never would he make her Prudence happy.

Already there were shadows coming and going on the young girl's hitherto unclouded face. Already Prudence's rippling laugh—that always in her mother's ears had sounded like a freshet of delight—was silenced.

And she would spend hours alone in the solitude of her room, apparently doing nothing . . . sitting by the

window that overlooked the winding ribbon of road that led to Wyndham Towers, like little Sister Anne, waiting and watching.

In the mornings, too, at breakfast-time, there would be violet shadows underneath her eyes, and the lids swollen suspiciously. She had cried herself to sleep the night before, the mother guessed.

What could be done? What said? Each human soul has its isolation, its holy ground whereon others—not even a mother—may intrude. Each human soul has its secrets and its reticences.

"If it had only been Mr. Armstrong!" Mrs. Page said to her husband, wistfully.

"Tush!" He was impatient at the very idea of his little Prudence with a lover! "Leave the child be! If she has a fancy for the foppish chap you speak of, she'll outgrow it! Calf love! It'll pass!"

"But he's the kind that will bring pain into her life."

Mr. Page had glared at that announcement.

"Let me get my hands on him and I'll horsewhip him. Just let me talk to Prudence. What does a mere child like her want to imagine she's in love for, I'd like to know?"

His wife regretted unburdening herself to him.

She had yielded to a foolish impulse in confiding the weight of her worries to some one who—being a mere man—didn't understand.

"Don't say a word to Prudence." She laid a hand on her husband's arm. "Mind, the girl hasn't spoken to *me* on the subject. It's just what I noticed, what I guessed."

"Then a stop'll have to be put to it. I won't have you upset by any nonsense of the sort. Why, the

child won't be marriageable for years!" He was indignant.

"Promise not to speak to her," his wife implored. Prudence was high-spirited, and who knows that if she thought her own folk had turned against her, she might run away with this Traymore!

Mr. Page had grunted and said nothing, but his manner towards his daughter was a queer mixture of thoughtfulness and watchful anxiety. He loved her very dearly, but he didn't in the least understand her.

Why must she be so restless? Why could she settle to nothing? If he himself had a worry on his mind, he'd work it off with hard manual labour of some sort, and feel all the better afterwards.

He'd send her on an errand. A brisk walk would do her good. There was rain-shine on the sunlit earth this morning, and the world was full of perfume, and the smell of green, growing things. Already the meadow grass was tall enough to hide the young rabbits.

"I want you to go to the library for me, Prue, and get that new book on the culture of sweet-peas. It's a two-mile walk, each way, and it'll brisk you up a bit. Nothing like air and exercise, you know."

He hoped she wouldn't guess his motive.

She consented listlessly. Anything to 'pass the time.'

"And what does a young girl want with 'passing the time'?" her father counter-thrust. "Leave that to the old folks. *You* ought to be living eagerly, every second of the day!"

"But nothing ever happens, buried alive in the country," said Prudence apathetically.

"Never happens? Gracious me! And the callers you've had! And the parties up at the Towers! What more do you want?"

"What more do I want? Don't you understand that I've got nothing—*nothing*—in my life?" A passion of resentment rang in her young voice.

"Nothing?" stuttered her father, taken aback at her vehemence. "You have a home, and a good bed to sleep in, and food to eat, and——"

"Even the animals have that! A human being has a—a soul——"

He stared at her. Wasn't there something almost indecent, blatant, as it were, in talking of one's 'soul'? What had come over Prudence in the last week or two? Where was his simple, unquestioning, unanalytical young daughter?

"It's souls that make us different from the beasts," she was panting, fire in her eyes. "You expect me to feed the chickens and work about the house and farm, and—and let my heart stifle—and my brain die from want of nourishment and companionship—and my soul starve! But I tell you I won't stand it! I'm going off into the world, and stand on my own two feet and earn my living, and—and *live*!"

With a sinking heart her father heard the ultimatum, and stood staring at his daughter, wordless and aghast.

Prudence walked along the country roads towards the library, revolt against her present circumstances still welling in her consciousness, mingled with regret at having caused her father pain.

But, worst of all, was the interminable heartache over Traymore's conduct.

She hadn't seen or heard of him in days and days! True love didn't act that way.

And—and the awful discovery of that letter to Virginia Dale—she couldn't shake it from her mind!

She hated Traymore even while she loved him. Queer anomaly!

And yet she longed for him, his kisses, and his insincere love-phrases. To drug her mind with them meant a cessation from this pain.

It had rained heavily in the night, and ineffably sweet breezes fanned her flushed young face as she tramped along the winding roads that led to the little country town where the library was located. 'Growing weather,' the farmers called it. Matter-of-fact men they were.

"Father would like me to marry one of *them*," thought Prudence, the tide of resentment welling in her heart again, and her soft lips curling in an unaccustomed twist of scorn. "Father would like me to be a vegetable, and 'safe.'"

Who wanted safety when the outside world must be so wonderful, and so inspiring?

Oh, to forget Bert Traymore and his kind!

Alas! she couldn't!

She passed the wood that had been their trysting-place a score of times. Spikes of flowered bluebell that would soon spread to a sapphire flood grew to its very edge. There was the butter-yellow of bunched cowslips in the meadow, too, and in the marshy places great splashes of king-cup gold. And all along the roadside there were trails of blue, blue speedwell that had drunk refreshingly of the soft April rain.

If the course of true love had run smoothly, never would she have wished to leave this lovely spot.

But to-day its beauty hurt her, just as Bert had hurt her, with his gay good looks and careless smiles.

Swallows, their wings intensely blue in the sunshine, skimmed across the road. The warmth had opened more fully the moist sprays of the fruit-trees, too, and all the orchards of the countryside were blushing rosily. Chaffinches were warbling gaily everywhere, taunting Prudence with their songs of joy and love fulfilled.

She swung along the road, her vagrant mind on Bert . . . Virginia Dale . . . hope of a coming letter . . . hope of an explanation . . . hope of an opportunity to grant him full forgiveness.

Ah! but would he give her such a chance? Had he not . . . (oh, agonizing thought!) . . . had he not planned this turn of affairs just to let her know that he was 'through' with her?

Chapter XVI — *Magic*

SO wrapped up was Prudence in her own perturbing thoughts that she failed to see a man's figure strolling in a cottage garden.

It was a very pretty cottage, set back a little from the road, with a big shed built on at the side for a laboratory.

But the tenant at the moment wasn't working. He was out in the early sunshine, taking a 'breather' from his toil, succumbing to the magic of a sweet spring morning, and listening to the deep humming of the bees about the hive.

"Good morning, Miss Prudence. Whither away?"

She started at the sound of Peter Armstrong's voice, for a moment staring at him stupidly.

"I—I didn't recognize you." Yes, of course it *was* he, in the very shabby suit he'd worn on the first occasion of their meeting, when she took him for a tramp! "I'm going to the library, to get a book on sweet-pea growing."

"Oh, I have a couple that maybe you'd like to have a look at." He opened the garden gate invitingly, his eyes eager. "Do come in and have a look at my domain."

She hesitated. Then, catching sight of old Nanny moving about the interior of Pear-Tree Cottage, yielded to curiosity, and the impulse for company and distraction.

"Just for a moment. I—I'd like to see the place you work in. I can't pronounce its name right . . . lab . . . labor . . ."

"That's the Latin for 'work,'" said Peter Armstrong, with a genial grin. "Nothing like hard toil, you know, to chase away the blues."

"I've got the blues this morning," supplemented Prudence unexpectedly. "Can you give me a job?"

He laughed outright.

"Your job is just to go around looking the way you look just now. That's accomplishment enough."

She flushed. Bert Traymore often had said that sort of thing, but with a glib quickness the other lacked.

And Peter Armstrong's eyes—such handsome eyes—looked directly at one, honest and sincere. *He* didn't pay one compliments. Everything he said, he meant. That was one sure thing about him.

He led the way to his laboratory,

It was a long, low shed, with several skylights and a couple of windows, giving lots of light for the 'experiments' conducted in the place.

A long shelf crammed with books of reference, records of work accomplished, and bundles of paper, ran along one side of the room.

Below the shelf there was a long table with lots of bottles on it, of queer shapes and sizes; burettes, pipettes and measuring flasks; a delicate balance in a glass case held a prominent position.

And on another, smaller table in the centre of the place was a queer muddy mess that looked like blacklead. The greasy mixture was on Peter Armstrong's coat, too, and a little of it on his hands.

"I've been mixing up lubricants," he said cheerfully, noticing her glance. "I test them on these little spinning discs"—he indicated the articles in question—"blending different kinds of oil with graphite."

Prudence didn't understand it, but the sound of his attractive voice somehow seemed to ease her pain. He talked as though he really *enjoyed* her company, and desired it.

"I wish I had a career," she said suddenly. "I envy workers, like yourself. I wish I were different from the—the stupid, dull creature I am——"

"Don't talk like that! If you only knew . . . !"

Their eyes met, his holding hers in an odd spell that sent a strange, perturbing thrill through every fibre of her being.

* * * * *

"If you only knew," repeated Peter Armstrong, his handsome eyes looking directly into hers, and his voice low and vibrant with a note she had not heard before.

"If you only knew the freshness, the inspiration that a girl like you can bring into a man's life, you would never dare to call yourself names again."

Freshness? Inspiration? And Bert Traymore had already tired of her! She could scarcely credit what Peter Armstrong said! She wanted desperately to believe it, and she knew he wasn't insincere, or a payer of idle, empty compliments, but . . . but . . .

Prudence's heart thrilled to the words. She told herself that this strange, electric excitement was because of Bert . . . that if one man, and he as famous as Peter Armstrong, found her an inspiration, there might be hope that Bert would feel that fascination, and return to her again.

The girl did not realize the full magnetism of Peter's personality. Her reaction had been to Peter, and not to the absent Bert. Prudence had a deal to learn about herself, if the truth be told.

She stood there in the dusty laboratory, looking up at Peter with her pretty eyes, a picture sweet enough to warm the heart of any man.

Peter was human. This trusting child had filled his thoughts considerably of late, more than he yet fully realized. She was so different from the women he had known. So different from *that one* who once had hurt him terribly . . . and yet there was a curve of cheek, a wave of hair, the upward lift of long, thick lashes . . . strangely reminiscent . . . it filled him with an agony of memory, and yet an odd, inexplicable hope. *Could a man love a second time?*

What words were these that she had dragged from him, almost against his will? 'Freshness'? 'Inspiration'?

Yes, she was both these things. There was a dewi-

ness about her like this sweet spring morning, an unconscious charm one couldn't quite define, but it was there.

Without hardly realizing that he did it, he put out his hand and touched her wrist . . . the little wrist that was so fragile-looking, yet so capable.

"Prudence! We're . . . *friends*, aren't we?"

She nodded dumbly. Heaven knew she needed a real friend . . . if Peter Armstrong meant it. (Did he, though?)

The man was thinking:

"That lift of dark lashes . . . that turn of the head . . . how like to *some one*! But this girl hasn't got the selfishness, the cruelty . . . !"

Memory stirred within him, and the old ache he'd hoped was dead. Queer how the elusive likeness to that 'some one' drew him like a magnet!

She had been in trouble, too. *He* knew what suffering meant.

She spoke now, with an effort seeking to break the magic spell, and sound normal and natural and at ease.

"I—I didn't like you, the first time I met you. But now things are different. I—misjudged."

Peter raised his brows. They were well defined, and had a little air of breeding all their own, as though his ancestors had been aristocrats. "I *was* a bit summary in meting out justice to the Traymore fellow. But he was asking for it. And you know, when I flung him in the water, I didn't realize that *you* were there."

Prudence's heart had given a stab at the mention of Traymore's name. But, all the same, her spirits rose. She was going to fight this miserable feeling, and strive to be what Peter Armstrong thought she was.

"Oh, it wouldn't have made a scrap of difference if you *had* seen me. You're a cave-man," she said rallyingly.

"Perhaps." He smiled. "Anyhow, I could fight for the woman I loved."

Another thrill shot through the girl, and a flush rose to her smooth forehead. How different from Bert Traymore! She couldn't see *him* fighting over a woman.

"I thought you were a woman-hater," said Prudence slowly.

At that moment, a mocking laugh came from the region of the open door, and—turning quickly—the man and girl saw, silhouetted in the aperture, the slim, elegant figure of Virginia Dale, clad in a white woolly skirt and jumper she had bought in a French watering-place of the ultra-fashionable kind, with a white felt hat in sailor shape set jauntily upon her goldy locks, her face painted to a perfect peachiness, but so cleverly done that mere man would not detect it—no, not even in the bright spring sunlight that flooded Peter's workshop!

"I echo Miss Page's observation," she cried gaily, nodding in assumed bonhomie towards the pair. "Peter, you sinner, you pretended you didn't care to have women round the place. And now I've actually caught you—*flirting!*"

According to Virginia's creed, the one sure way to 'put a man off' another girl was to chaff him about her before the time was ripe for teasing. Of course he wasn't serious *yet* about this Page child, but she—Virginia—would get the good work in, in time.

Peter looked at her with a twinkle in his eye.

"And who constituted *you* our chaperone?"

She hated that insinuation, giving her the weight of years.

And so at once she tried another tack, of flattering interest in his work.

"Oh, do show me how the little wheels go round!" She skipped over to the central table, eyeing the friction discs. "What's that messy stuff, Peter?"

"Not an aid to beauty," he grinned. (Oh! *had* he recognized her, after all, on that unfortunate encounter at the Towers, when the beauty's face had worn its mask of mud? Up till now, she'd quite convinced herself he hadn't. But this hint pointed otherwise. Wretched little Lucia must have given the show away!)

"Do show me the experiment," she urged, to hide her confusion.

"All right. It's quite simple. Mixing lubricants . . . so. Now I start spinning the disc . . . then pour the mixture on. . . ." Peter's hand shook a little with suppressed amusement at Virginia's antics, so that he poured too much of the greasy mixture on one of the little discs, and off the messy compound flew at a tangent, spattering the enthusiast's snow-white frock, white shoes and stockings, and even the new white hat and peach-bloom complexion, with a long, muddy trail.

Chapter XVII — *In the Spinney*

PRUDENCE walked away from Pear-Tree Cottage with a lighter heart than she had entered it.

Virginia Dale—to whom Bert had written the ardent letter that had so caused Prudence's heart to ache—had marched in on Prudence unexpectedly, but the pain of coming face to face with her rival in Bert's

affections hadn't been such a distressing experience after all.

Was it because of Peter Armstrong's words?

What had he said?

"If you only knew the freshness, the inspiration that a girl like you can bring into a man's life, you would never dare to call yourself names again."

Ah! that had been balm on wounds.

Not even Virginia's advent—white-clad, beautiful Virginia, intent on fascinating Peter, as she tried to weave her spell on every man she came across—not even *she* could take away the queer, heady feeling of elation that the interview had brought about.

Was it because of young Armstrong's opinion?

Was it because a little of her own self-confidence had been restored to her again?

Following that train of thought, was it because Virginia, despite her lovely clothes and beauty, had cut so poor a figure at the recent interview?

Prudence marched along the highway, drawing deep breaths of sweet-scented air, and marvelling at her own feeling of elation. After days and nights of pain, when the whole world seemed utterly, intolerably sad and gloomy, it was a huge relief to feel that, after all, life might contain a large variety of worth-while things.

After much anguish, this was the beginning of the real woman Prudence.

The cuckoo's fluted call no longer had a mocking note. It was sweet and soothing, and had music in it.

A little stream that ran along the roadside for a hundred yards or so babbled delightfully as it dimpled over green weeds near its surface, or made a tiny tinkle as it divided round some stick or stone.

Prudence diverted her own course to follow its meandering into a sort of glade where the beeches' spindle buds were sprouting in a fairy tracery of green. Here the brook went gliding under delicate willows, and on the stream's edge were the plants of waterside forget-me-nots.

'Lady's smocks,' in their pink and lilac, made an enchanting splash of colour everywhere among the green, and here and there were clumps of kingcups, gloriously golden.

The girl sank down upon the mossy bank. A willow-tree was just behind her, screening her off from the rest of the wood.

How quiet it was! How peaceful!

Strange that a few days ago she couldn't have borne the solitude of this sanctuary! She would have cried her eyes out, as she'd done these many nights.

"But I feel better now," she told herself, not fully realizing yet that it was Peter Armstrong's healing influence that had worked the miracle.

Fifty yards away from where she sat, a tall elm showed rooks' nests in its summit, half veiled by the green. Prudence regarded them for a moment through the delicate tracery of her own resting-place.

And then her gaze travelled downwards to the bottom of the giant tree. . . . Good gracious! a man was there, kneeling on last year's dead leaves, working intently in the ground. . . . He had his back to her, and there was something familiar in the set of the light grey coat, in the tilt of the grey felt hat . . . she couldn't see him properly . . . who was he? what was he doing?

He had some sort of implement that he was working with. Oh yes, a trowel. Digging a hole, was he?

And why ?

She sat quite still, watching from her hiding-place. Some mystery was afoot. She was all interest. From the motion of his right arm, she guessed that he had stopped digging. Later, she saw that he was patting the earth into position.

And then he rose to his feet, half turned round, and . . . good heavens ! the man was none other than her quondam sweetheart, Bertram Traymore !

What *was* Bert doing in the spinney at this hour of the morning ?

Was he coming towards her ? Had he seen her ? And what was his mission underneath the tall elm-tree ?

Why that particular elm ? There were others further back from the spinney . . . indeed, there were other trees all round that spot.

He stood for a moment, hesitant, then glancing down at his suit, started to flick it with his right hand, which he had just freed from a gardening-glove.

Prudence crouched lower behind her screen, so that he might not see her.

Let him find her of his own accord. She wouldn't help him. He had behaved—oh yes, he had !—abominably !

From this angle she could see his face. Now he was taking off his hat and wiping his forehead. His face was red and hot, and his hair disturbed from its usual boot-button smoothness. Queer how she had fancied him an Adonis of good looks ! Why, surely his chin was weak ? It lacked the square line, the forcefulness, of Peter Armstrong's determined jaw.

And why was he looking round as though he were afraid ? She remembered noticing once or twice in

the past that Bert's eyes often had an odd look in them . . . furtive . . . suspicious.

Janet Mercer had called them 'shifty.' That, of course, was going too far. It was simply because Bert and Janet had no liking for each other.

Still, his behaviour did seem rather queer just now.

What did it mean?

What would he say if he came over here and found her? Ought she to rise and show herself? If not, would he accuse her of spying on him?

Traymore solved all these questions by suddenly swinging round again in the direction of the denser woods, and making off. This movement coincided with the clopety-clop of horses' hoofs upon the road. Someone was approaching, and Bert betook himself away in an opposite direction.

The riders were only a couple of farmer's boys. The spell, however, was broken for Prudence, and she came out of her hiding-place at once.

But curiosity still urged her to discover Traymore's mission at the bottom of the elm-tree.

Indeed, the whole thing was most mysterious.

Had he a hidden secret in his life?

If it weren't that his air had been so furtive, his ear attuned to approaching sounds as he stood waiting, listening, Prudence might have thought that he had been merely digging primrose-roots, or amusing himself with turning over last year's withered leaves.

She slipped out to the open road and proceeded on her delayed journey to the library.

How doubly awkward it would be, were she to return now and investigate the mystery, and maybe find Bert's eyes upon her, furiously indignant at her inquisi-

tiveness, yet at the same time suspecting that he himself was the magnet that had drawn her back!

No! That wouldn't do at all. She could return later.

Or maybe Bert himself would solve the riddle for her.

(Queer how the former agony of pain had gone! Queer how she could look on Bert's face with—if not yet equanimity—a measure of composure and a freedom from that keen suffering she had recently endured!)

As she walked the highway, head upheld, eyes brave to face the future, her thoughts were back on Peter Armstrong, and their interview in the laboratory.

How kindly he had been! He radiated sympathy and understanding.

And—strangest thing of all!—he hadn't seemed at all delighted over the advent of Virginia Dale! If he had once loved Virginia—and Prudence hitherto had thought so—could he have been so indifferent in his manner towards her now?

"If he had loved Virginia, he would still be suffering. I don't want him to suffer." So she explained the matter to herself, not knowing the real state of her feelings in the least.

Prudence reached her destination, got her books on sweet-pea growing, then walked up the main street of the little country town, gazing in the shop-windows at the new spring fashions. Exhilarating to feel interest in the styles again! If falling in love with Bert had been intoxicating, what comfort there was in falling *out of* love that had only brought such pain into her life!

"I've finished with romance, and I'm going to be happy, minus love!"

Daringly, imprudently, she flung the challenge to fate, little reckoning that fate has ways and means of making the too-daring pay for such a speech!

Chapter XVIII *Love the Beautifier*

"LOVE," said Janet Mercer, smiling, "is the most disturbing thing in the whole wide world. But any woman who dodges it is a fool, and is missing the one big happiness of life."

Her big mouth had the up-quirk at the corners once again, and her small greenish eyes were all alight with joy.

Across the table of the little tea-shop where Janet and she were enjoying this chance meeting and a morning cup of coffee, Prudence regarded her friend.

What had transpired to bring that look into her face?

"Well, of all the inconsistent creatures!" Prudence couldn't find the words to voice her surprise. "And you only telling me the other day to beware of men!"

The two girls had run into each other unexpectedly in the main street of the little country town where Janet's lodgings were, and had foregathered for a chat.

Janet looked a little sheepish. Prudence had a disconcerting memory.

"It must have been a touch of indigestion. I get real old-maidish . . . sort of waspish . . . when I'm all tired out."

"Oh no," said truthful Prudence. "It was Will Ogilvie irritated you. You said——"

"Never mind what I said." Janet stirred her cup of coffee, and then helped herself to another lump of sugar, dropping it with a little 'plop' into the steaming cup. "I'm a cantankerous old maid, at times, but I've repented."

Prudence stared at her, wide-eyed. Queer irony of fate that, just when she herself had forsworn romance for ever, she should encounter prosaic Janet in a lovelorn mood!

"You mean you've made it up with Will, and the two of you are going to marry?"

"Yes—to the first part." Was Janet actually *blushing* under her freckled skin? "Query in the meantime to the second."

"Because of his mother, I suppose?" Prudence sipped her coffee thoughtfully. She couldn't share in Janet's mood this morning. Then she added, with sudden vehemence:

"Will's downright weak, tying himself to her apron-strings the way he does."

Now, for years, this precisely had been Janet's own opinion. It had been a fruitful source of quarrel between the oddly assorted lovers.

But to-day, her heart full of a sweet, throbbing loveliness that was part and parcel of the spring, and Will's good-night kiss, and his broken "I love you, Janet. Even when I'm a beast to you, I do. I swear it. . . ."—she flamed up in quick defence.

"A little kid like you doesn't know what you're talking of. I wouldn't have Will different for the world. It's his heart of gold that keeps him so kind and thoughtful to his mother. You can bet your life that any man who's made that way is going to be a good husband, and any girl who'd get him 'ud be lucky."

Prudence was astonished at the outburst, but said nothing. Janet, in a fiery mood, alarmed her rather.

But the fire at once died down.

For anger couldn't live two minutes in a heart that beat to a melody like the throb of 'cellos. The memory of a man's arms about her thrilled this lonely, unbeautiful woman till the homely, honest, freckled face was quite transfigured.

For love is the greatest beautifier in the universe.

"You're . . . *nearly* pretty to-day, Janet," blurted out her friend, then could have bitten her stupid tongue for 'damning with such faint praise.'

But Janet beamed on her across the tiny table of the tea-shop. No petulant beauty, hardened to compliments, and accustomed to being exquisite in lovers' eyes, knows the magic of being 'nearly pretty,' when for years even one's mother thinks one plain!

"You're a nice child, Prudence," commented Janet, mollified. Then: "Your heart's in the right place . . . oh no, it *isn't*"—she looked a little awkward, as though she had been too daring in her correction—"I mean to say, *if* it's in Bert Traymore's keeping——" She broke off meaningly.

It was Prudence's turn to flush, or be annoyed, according to her character.

But instead, she contrived to shrug her shoulders carelessly and reach out to help herself to a chocolate éclair, as though the selection of the pastry was of infinitely more importance than a sweetheart.

"I'm not worrying about men." Then, before Janet could express surprise at this clever air of detachment, she artlessly queried:

"D'you think éclairs 'll make me fat?"

"Merciful heavens! Is it a child like you think-

ing of your figure? Whatever's come over you?" Janet's cup was poised midway between the table and her lips. "Are you taking a leaf out of Virginia Dale's book, or what?"

Prudence laughed.

"I wish you'd seen her this morning, in Mr. Armstrong's laboratory, with black grease all over her new white hat and frock, and on her hair, and streaking right across her face!"

"Good gracious! What were the pair of you doing there? Did the man ask you in?"

"He asked *me* in," said Prudence, flushing just a trifle under the other's scrutiny. "And then Miss Dale arrived, and went too near one of his experiments——"

Janet pursed her lips.

"You mark my words, that girl's wild about young Armstrong. She's going to catch him, if she can. And then, heaven help him!"

"But I'm sure Mr. Armstrong isn't attracted to Virginia," cried Prudence in a much more emphatic tone than the occasion warranted. Had she realized the hot eagerness of that phrase, it would have surprised herself as much as it surprised her listener.

"I never said he was." A sudden idea turned in Janet's brain. How splendid it would be for Prudence —who was young, and ignorant, and intensely feminine, and needed a strong shoulder to lean upon—how splendid and how suitable if she and Peter Armstrong fell in love! "I only said that the Dale girl was wild about Peter. But if he's a wise man, he'll give *her* a wide berth."

Prudence's pretty face had clouded. That hint of shadow gave Janet hope.

Young girls were kittle cattle, and contrary. Prudence hitherto had pretended absolute indifference to Peter. But now—if she *was* indifferent to him—why did Virginia's name in conjunction with the young inventor's bring that worried line to her smooth forehead?

"She's very, very lovely," was, however, all that Prudence answered.

"Lovely? Huh! Handsome is as handsome does! Besides, you ought to see her in the early morning. As yellow as a duck's foot, and the lines showing, before she's got the cold cream and the powder on to hide 'em. *I* know." Janet nodded her head sagely. "Not that she isn't young enough, though old in knowledge. Old as Egypt. It's the life she's led has told on her. Dancing till all hours of the morning. Playing cards, with her eyes as keen as a rapier, and hard and merciless to an opponent. Mouth set like a steel trap. You'd think her very life depended on it, as I do believe it does, for it's my belief she makes her living at bridge and poker and these gambling games."

Prudence shivered. The insecurity of such a mode of existence frightened her, even in the hearing.

"Luck's been against her lately too," continued Janet, warming to her theme. "I heard her trying to borrow fifty pounds from Mrs. Vansittart the other day. Mrs. Vansittart had lent her money before, and made an excuse about Lucia's last operation being so expensive, and a lot of other bills she had to meet. And Miss Virginia—who sometimes does know when she's defeated, and when not to press her point until a more fortuitous time—she passed it off with a giggle, and the proverb that if one was unlucky at cards, one 'ud have lots of luck in love. But Mrs. Vansittart up and

told her, if that was so, she'd better bring matters to a crisis, and get a husband capable of paying her debts and stopping her gambling, and looking after her. Miss Jinny was as mad as a wet hen in a thunderstorm ! "

Prudence had to laugh at that quaint simile.

The two girls left the tea-shop, and—walking along the main street of the little country town—saw Mrs. Vansittart's imposing car standing outside the post office.

" A special dinner-party at the Towers to-night," vouchsafed Janet, with a slight curl of the lips. " How these folks do live for pleasure ! All the out-of-season dainties, no matter what the cost ! And in spite of all the noise and fuss, I don't believe there's much enjoyment in these parties."

Prudence was too young and fresh, as yet, to take that view.

" It must be rather nice to have so much money that you can get anything you fancy," she hazarded rather timidly, for she was afraid of Janet's cutting tongue.

But before the latter could comment upon the observation, Mrs. Vansittart herself came out of the post office, looking rather worried.

She walked directly towards her car, and then, sighting the two young women, paused a moment, her brow lightening.

" Miss Mercer, funny I never thought of you ! Could you help me out of a difficulty ? "

" Depends what it is," said Janet gruffly. Mrs. Vansittart's wealth and power in the neighbourhood couldn't overawe *her*.

" A guest has suddenly failed me for to-night, and it

means we'll have to sit down thirteen to dinner. Lord Cumbermere is coming, and he's awfully superstitious. He'd rather eat in the servants' hall than chance such a number—and that's saying something, for the old fellow loves his food better than home or wife or family!"

Janet looked rather stolidly at her employer.

"Lucia has her massage at six-thirty, and she isn't sleeping well. I won't be through with her till nearly eight o'clock."

"Oh, leave the child this once! She'll be all right," said the impatient mother, her thoughts centred on the success or failure of the important dinner.

The trained nurse shook her head.

"Conscience wouldn't allow me. I wouldn't be able to swallow a morsel. Besides, I've another case at half-past eight. And I'm no social star, anyhow. I'd only put my foot in it."

The hostess already knew that well. In despair, she turned to Prudence.

"Couldn't you help me out? I know you're rather young, but that's no fault nowadays."

Prudence shrank back.

"I haven't got a frock."

"Well, I can lend you the very thing. Virginia Dale ordered it from town, and hated it when she tried it on. It was too tight for her, and didn't suit her. So I bought it from her to send to one of my young nieces for her coming-out party, a month from now. She's just your figure, dear, and it would fit you perfectly. No matter if you spoiled it, I could get another." This with the easy speech on money matters that was peculiar to Mrs. Vansittart and her kind.

Prudence hesitated. Already indebted to the kind-hearted woman, she didn't want to 'let her down,' when help was possible.

But she didn't at all fancy the occasion. And . . . she did NOT want to meet Bert Traymore!

Mrs. Vansittart was persistent. She waived all objections aside.

"I'll send the car down to Green Gables at seven o'clock. That will give you lots of time to dress at my place. My maid will have everything ready for you, and the frock laid out. You already have white satin slippers? Good! I'm sure you'll enjoy the evening, dear."

And away she went in her gorgeous limousine, leaving a disquieted maiden on the pavement.

Chapter XIX *Calamity*

"I DON'T half like it, Prudence. I don't, indeed!" In the peaceful little parlour of Green Gables, Mrs. Page regarded her pretty daughter with worried, anxious eyes.

"I couldn't get out of it, mother. Mrs. Vansittart was so—so determined." Prudence fidgeted with a paper-cutter that lay upon some books.

"Then you ought to have shown an equal strength of character."

A pause. Perfume of lilac came through the open windows. Some swallows darted by with arrow speed, skimming over the field gates, flying low. With a sort of envy, Prudence noted the sureness of their dash, the fineness of their judgment, and wished that she herself had power to fly away from all the things

that worried. Trammels of home were weighing on her now. Oh, for *independence*!

"As for this idea of borrowing a frock, it goes against the grain terribly," went on her mother, the furrow deepening in her forehead. "I can't think where your pride has gone to, dear."

Prudence's soft lips set in a stubborn line. Up till now, she hadn't wanted in the least to visit Wyndham Towers. The place hadn't very happy memories.

But her mother's opposition seemed unreasonable.

Did they want her to have no pleasures at all, these older, wiser folk?

They thought that youth ought to be *kept down*, didn't they?

That puzzling gulf between the generations! Why, it almost seemed as though her mother *grudged* her any pleasure!

Across the parlour table, mother and daughter regarded each other with misunderstanding eyes.

"I have my pride," said Prudence stiffly and resentfully. "But, just the same, I can't see where it would be a crime to oblige Mrs. Vansittart this once."

"No good will come of it," was her mother's pessimistic comment. The gusty sigh that accompanied the remark irritated her listener further.

"Oh, anything to get out *somewhere* for an evening!"

Pain mingled with the worry on her mother's face, and Prudence's heart gave a little stab of remorse, although she fought against it.

"You find it very dull here, do you?" came the wistful query.

The girl nodded stubbornly.

"Nothing ever doing. One day just like the next."

Queer how she hated to hurt her mother, whom she dearly loved . . . and yet she *must* speak out! Must her life always be in leading-strings?

"You're not hankering after going to the city, and a—a career?" With difficulty, Mrs. Page got the hated word out. "You're not wanting to do what Jennie Pearson did?"

Jennie Pearson was a farmer's daughter who, flouting the wishes of her stern old father, had run away to town to 'go on the stage.' Jennie's 'career' had been a trifle chequered in more ways than one. Its manifold ups and downs had included a brief marriage with a ne'er-do-well, which later on had been annulled.

And Jennie—outwardly the same pert damsel, and apparently in no wise chastened by her experiences of city life—had returned to the bosom of the country, for a period of 'resting' . . . 'between shows' . . . whatever that might mean.

The wayward Jennie had never been one of Prudence's friends.

It annoyed Prudence to have her held up now as an Awful Warning.

"I can't see that Jennie Pearson did anything so *very* terrible. Her father worked her awfully hard on the farm, and never gave her anything to buy pretty clothes with, nor a penny to go off on a holiday. Jennie had a right to choose her own life."

Quick anxiety sprang up in the eyes of Mrs. Page. Was *her* daughter going to do the same thing? Rebellion and unrest were in the air.

Prudence read her thought, and gave a short, rather mirthless laugh.

"You can't see *me* as a toe-dancer? I'd have to seek other fields of endeavour. But, just the same, I have a sort of sympathy with Jennie. I'd rather *wear* out than *rust* out."

Her mother said, with some acerbity:

"You will wear out, soon enough, if you keep flying between here and the Towers, striving to keep up with people out of your own sphere."

A spark of anger glinted in the pretty eyes of Prudence. The entry of her father made an interruption. Immediately her mother laid the tale before him.

To the older woman's surprise and chagrin, he did not back her up.

"Let the child have her enjoyments. She's been moping lately. What matter if she does borrow a dress for the occasion? Mrs. Vansittart is the one under the obligation, and not Prudence. Our girl'll do her credit."

So away went Prudence in the handsome limousine, at seven o'clock of a sweet spring evening, with a restless cuckoo calling in the woods and the sedge-warblers trilling in the reed-beds by the river, and a belated lark rising from the meadow-land, up, up to the illimitable blue.

Money! Power! Luxury! And Beauty! As the big car purred along the winding roads, the girl's heart dwelt upon these things, with a queer, pleasurable excitation.

And love?

Ah, no! She was definitely 'through' with that!

Odd, just the same, how her thoughts would turn to Peter Armstrong, and their very recent interview! Such a *man* he was! So virile, and so dominating! Queer how the thought of Bertram Traymore dwindled

into almost nothing, in comparison with the upstanding young inventor!

Was it because Virginia Dale had sought him out?

Or was it a certain forcefulness of personality? Magnetism? Or the utter sincerity of the man?

Mrs. Vansittart was already dressed when the limousine arrived, and immediately led Prudence to her own suite, which consisted of a large, handsome bedroom, a pretty boudoir decorated in the Second Empire style, with true lovers' knots and flying cupids painted on the walls . . . and a white-tiled, nickel-fitted bathroom full of luxurious contrivances for one's comfort.

"This is the frock." She indicated a gleaming mass of satin spread upon a 'chaise longue' in the bedroom. "White is your best bet, child, with that fair skin of yours. It ought to suit you."

Indeed it did, as Prudence saw her reflection in the long pier-glass nearly an hour later. Simple in construction, yet cut by a master hand, it gleamed incomparably under the brilliant lights, wrapping her slender figure in soft, shining folds of white. Down the left side, masses of acacia blossom fell in a cascade from the shoulder to the floor, outlining the low, softly draped girdle at the waist-line.

"I have never looked like this in all my life before," said Prudence softly, the queer excitation at her heart again.

* * * * *

Peter Armstrong wasn't at the dinner!

And she—Prudence—had somehow been so *sure* he would be there!

Was it for *him* that she had dressed so carefully, taking such pleasure in her gorgeous gown?

An empty feeling seized her. (Having forsworn love, it did seem queer that she should *miss* this Peter person!)

Bertram Traymore she avoided. The boot-button sleekness of his well-oiled head, the too-excellent fit of his ultra-fashionable dinner-jacket, the suave smoothness of his manners . . . all these things she noticed now, and marvelled at her past infatuation.

"There is nothing so dead as a dead love!" says the proverb.

But had it ever been *real* love that she had felt for this young dandy?

He tried to seek her out, but she avoided him. That whetted his hunter's instinct.

Gad! the girl looked beautiful to-night. Never had he seen her quite so lovely. Not even Jinny, marvellously gowned in orchid draperies, could hold a candle to the Prudence child.

But, as time passed, and almost pointedly she ignored him, he began to feel chagrined. Was his hold on her so slight as that?

Admiration changed to annoyance, and annoyance to actual anger.

Unconscious of these feelings, Prudence did her best to be agreeable to her dinner-partner, a red-faced, genial country squire whose brains were not his long suit, but who was susceptible to feminine beauty.

It was an elaborate meal, and the profusion of 'courses,' knives and forks, rather confused the girl. She watched her hostess, copying her example, and succeeded in not making any noticeable mistake.

But she was glad when the long session round the

table ended, and the ladies rose to go to the drawing-room, leaving the men behind.

"Your hair is coming down," tittered Virginia Dale spitefully, as she swept by Prudence in the hall. "I tried to signal you during dinner, but you were so enraptured with your partner that you didn't see my signs."

This was untrue. A tiny curl *had* crept loose on Prudence's white neck, but it was quite in keeping with her quaint frock and coiffure, and really enhanced her beauty, as Virginia's own partner had remarked.

But the spiteful comment disconcerted Prudence, as indeed Virginia had intended that it should.

"I'll run into Mrs. Vansittart's bedroom and arrange it," said the young girl, flushing hotly, and putting a swift hand up to her curly locks.

Arrived there, she realized there had been no truth in Virginia's 'cattiness.'

"She only wanted to make me feel bad. It's a return for what happened in Mr. Armstrong's laboratory this morning," thought Prudence, with a wry little smile, surveying her charming image in Mrs. Vansittart's long pier-glass.

She had no desire to go now to the drawing-room and encounter Miss Virginia a second time. And so she lingered in the bedroom, patting her hair into a more decorous smoothness, and then spent an odd moment or two in Mrs. Vansittart's boudoir with a magazine she found lying on that lady's desk.

Mrs. Vansittart found her there, and smilingly chided her for lingering.

"You naughty girl! You must come along and meet my women friends!"

In spite of her hostess's rallying way, Prudence felt that she had committed a social error in lingering in the boudoir, and at once apologized.

She did her best to talk to Lady Cumbermere, but the latter snubbed her, and so did another homely looking woman who had sticking-out teeth, and wore a very obvious 'toupet' under the fond delusion that it 'took years off her age.'

Prudence felt uncomfortable.

The entry of Bert Traymore and her own dinner-partner created an interruption. The latter sought her side at once.

Prudence and he were chatting together, when up came Traymore, a queer look on his face.

"Mrs. Vansittart wants to speak to you," he said.

The girl rose, and as she did so, Bert half stumbled against her, and apologized.

She crossed the parquet floor to her hostess, who had a worried air.

"A most awkward thing has happened, my dear," said Mrs. Vansittart in a stage whisper, which 'carried,' however, to several of her guests. "I had two hundred pounds in notes in the small desk in my boudoir . . . they were there only half an hour ago . . . and now *they're gone*! And I'd stupidly left a pair of very valuable diamond ear-rings—pendant type, and worth at least three hundred—in the top small drawer of my dressing-table—and *they've vanished too*! It was very careless of me . . . but my maids are all honest, every one of them . . . been with me for years . . . and . . . now *don't* think I'm imagining anything, but *you* were the last person in the suite, weren't you?" She flung Prudence a queer, embarrassed glance.

"I—I've only just come from there. I—I ran in

to arrange my hair. You saw me in the boudoir, by the desk——" Prudence broke off, very pale.

By this time, thanks to the offices of Mr. Traymore, and Miss Virginia Dale, who had just heard from him the story, the entire room knew of their hostess's recent loss. Virginia came right up to Prudence and Mrs. Vansittart, as did the other guests. Only Bert Traymore hung back a little.

"Stolen? Nonsense!" cried Prudence's genial dinner-partner, with a grin. He was an honest-minded, simple soul, and subtlety was not his forte. "You're dreaming, Mrs. Van! I bet you'll find the diamonds sticking in your gown somewhere, and as for the two hundred, why, you've gone and spent it, and forgotten! But just to set your mind at rest, let ME play detective! Come on, ladies and gentlemen!" He wagged a playful finger at them all. "I've got a search-warrant—ha! ha! I'm Sherlock Holmes! I'll begin with the prettiest girl in the room, Miss Prudence Page!"

Little guessing what his action would unfold, he advanced, smiling gaily, towards Prudence.

"No pockets in your gown? No hand-bag? No vanity-case? That only leaves the sash as hidey-hole! Come, let me look!"

He slipped a finger in the edge of the wide draped girdle that the girl was wearing, and—to his own consternation and the breathless amazement of spectators—jerked out a roll of ten-pound notes and a glittering diamond ear-ring that fell to the parquet floor with a clatter, and lay there, winking up at the astounded audience with a hard, remorseless eye!

AFTER the first gasp of amazement, a sudden terrible silence fell upon the guests at Wyndham Towers.

It was a silence much more horrible than any words could be.

Prudence, white-faced and trembling, was the one who broke it.

"I don't understand . . . it's a mistake . . . I never saw the notes before . . . nor *that*"—she pointed to the diamond ear-ring lying on the floor.

Bert Traymore picked it up, and handed it to the shaking girl.

"It isn't mine! Oh, it isn't mine! You—you surely *cannot* think I took it?" She turned piteously, like a fawn at bay, towards Mrs. Vansittart, who seemed paralysed at the stupendous discovery.

The latter, in her lazy, selfish way, had always liked the young Page girl. Never had she dreamt her capable of ingratitude such as this. *A common thief!*

That was what came of showing people kindness. What a fool she'd been to give the child free access to her private rooms! Succumbing to temptation, Prudence had stolen the valuable jewels, then hunted the little desk in the boudoir for further booty!

"And her manner did seem queer and strained when I found her standing by the desk," thought the hostess, in a quick flash. "She was pretending to read a magazine, but now I know what she was doing."

Aloud she said:

"Would you mind giving me the other ear-ring, please?"

Virginia Dale was heard to titter at what she thought

the delicious irony of the request. Would Prudence *mind*, indeed?

But sarcasm was far from Mrs. Vansittart. It was terrible to think this young, sweet-faced girl capable of such an act. And maddening to feel that her entire dinner-party had been spoiled irrevocably.

Such *talk* as there would be! The good lady didn't object to flattering publicity anent her entertainments and her generosity, but a tale like this about one of her guests—a *woman* too—was hateful to her pride as hostess.

And down in her kindly heart she felt real sorrow for this wretched girl.

Prudence, in dazed fashion, was groping with her fingers in her sash.

"I'll give it you . . . if I can find it," she was stammering.

Even the most analytical would have found her guilty, with such terror in her eyes, such pallor in her face.

"It's here . . . I haven't the least idea how . . ." She had found the fellow of the glittering stone that now lay in Mrs Vansittart's reluctant palm "Take it away. I I don't want it. I— I didn't take it. I haven't any notion how —how— - -"

Virginia Dale drew nearer. A triumphant light was in her eyes, and a cruel little smile hovered about the corners of her carefully reddened lips.

"Must have fallen from the skies," she volunteered to Bert Traymore, in a carrying aside. "I only wish diamonds would rain on *me*! But no such luck!"

Mrs. Vansittart took the second ear-ring without a word. All eyes were on the unfortunate girl who was standing, dumb and trembling, facing them.

"I say, I'm frightfully sorry for being such a fool as to—to start a search," blundered the red-faced squire who had been Prudence's dinner-partner. "I mean to say, I never thought . . . I never dreamt. . . ."

So *he* imagined her guilty too! Why—horror on horror!—all these staring people did! It was unbearable, incredible!

"I never took the diamonds. I never saw that roll of notes. I——"

But human nature—sensitive, girlish human nature—couldn't stand the ordeal any longer. With two hands flung up to her quivering face, Prudence broke into passionate, heart-broken sobs.

Mrs. Vansittart caught her by the arm. A sudden pity welled up in her worldly heart. The child was poor, and had been overly tempted. What a gross, unthinking blunder it had been, to transplant her from humdrum Green Gables to the notice and attention and flattery of the smart folks at Wyndham Towers! Small wonder she had given way!

"Don't be afraid, my dear, that I shall say anything about it. You're quite safe. I shan't take any action." The good woman murmured these words into Prudence's ear as she led the girl out of the drawing-room and into the hall.

"Let me go home," moaned Prudence, like a child that has been hurt. A terrible longing for her mother's comforting presence was on her. "Let me go home."

"That will be best, after what has happened," said Mrs. Vansittart slowly. "To-morrow you will come and see me, and we can talk the matter over." She forced herself to pat the weeping girl on the shoulder, in token of forgiveness. "I understand that you were

tempted . . . in a way *I* was the one to blame, and not you, for leaving the things lying where——"

Prudence wheeled round on her, eyes suddenly aflash behind the tears.

"In spite of what I've said, you DO think I stole your ear-rings and the money?" A fighting note, the sharp desire to vindicate her honour, gave a keen edge to the challenge.

Mrs. Vansittart's stiffened. It was one thing to pity and forgive this forlorn child, and quite another thing to be called abruptly to task for it.

"If you can offer any reasonable explanation, I shall listen," she said grimly. "But at present I have no other alternative than to think you took my property."

Prudence hurled off the glittering white satin gown that had proved her own undoing.

Hateful, hateful garment! *White*, emblem of innocence! *White*, of unsullied reputation! What irony of fate had prompted that she wear that frock to-night?

Like Cinderella after the ball, she found herself once more in her simple cotton gown, and fleeing from the scene of her humiliation.

"I'll telephone the garage for the limousine. Just wait a moment."

Prudence didn't even hear her hostess's words. She ran like one possessed, through the wide hallway and out to the hot, still night. Oh, for covering darkness, to hide her misery and shame!

How *could* they think her guilty? How could they stare at her with cold, unfriendly and condemning eyes, when never in the whole course of her young life had she done a mean or dishonest act?

She sobbed aloud as she ran down the long carriage-drive, flanked on both sides by Lombardy poplars, just like sentinels. They, too, seemed to be watching her, stern and unforgiving. . . .

"I must get away, away!" the girl's mind reiterated. Oh, to leave this neighbourhood for ever! Oh, to hide her head in some quiet spot where no one in the world could ever find her!

"It will break mother's heart, this awful accusation!" That thought persisted, torturing her.

How right her mother had been, in telling her that no good, no happiness, would come from visiting at Wyndham Towers! How impatient she had been with that kind friend and ally! Ah, if only she had listened more!

Now, now it was *too late*!

Gradually the resolve formed in Prudence's mind that she would run away. Impossible to face to-morrow here! *Miles* must be put between herself and this neighbourhood!

To her distraught imagining, she saw the entire country-side ringing with the scandal of to-night's occurrence. She saw the sneering glances, or averted faces, as the case might be.

And *Peter Armstrong*? What of *him*? Would *he* condemn her too?

She could visualize his look of sheer incredulity, gradually changing to scorn and contempt for her.

She could hear Virginia Dale triumphing.

Oh no . . . a thousandfold impossible to stay!

In the clear moonlight she could see the hands of her little wrist-watch. They pointed to ten minutes past ten. The last train up to London had already gone!

To-morrow morning, there was a train at seven o'clock.

Then she recollected that the express stopped at nights at Blackthorn Junction at eleven fifteen. Blackthorn Junction was four miles away, if one journeyed by road, but a short cut through the woods and across the common almost halved the distance.

Had she sufficient courage to traverse the lonely route so late, and all alone?

It required less courage than did waking to-morrow at Green Gables, to this tragedy.

By running rapidly, she drew near her home before ten-thirty. Mother was in bed, and the light in her room extinguished. Father was at a smoking concert in the village, and wouldn't be back till after eleven.

Prudence crept in very quietly, and found the haven of her own room.

She must act quickly. Her brain was numb with pain, but her one blind instinct was to run away and hide, far from her enemies, and alike far from those she loved.

She slipped out of her thin frock and donned a plain shirt-blouse, and a neat coat and skirt. The moonlight was the sole illumination of the small apartment. Should she light her candles, their beam would shine through the windows to her mother's room, and if the latter wasn't sleeping, she would rise at once to inquire why her daughter was back so early from the party.

In the vague light, Prudence couldn't find her gloves. What did they matter? She was going to no social function.

Four pounds—her worldly all!—lay in a little locked

box on her dressing-table. She would need every penny of it.

"It will keep me for a week or two, providing I don't find work at once," thought she, slipping the notes into her hand-bag.

Then she sat down to write a letter to her mother. Big tears dropped upon that letter, but she did not stop to wipe them off. Not a moment dare be lost in getting far away. She simply couldn't face to-morrow morning.

Once or twice, she started, listening, thinking she heard a movement in the house.

But the ensuing silence reassured her.

Then, very quietly, she crept down the stair, and out into the moonlit night, running in haste across the fields and through the woods that led to Blackthorn Junction.

Panting, a sharp pain in her side, she sighted the railway lines at last. She must not, dare not, miss the express!

As she ran, she dragged a pound-note from her hand-bag, wherewith to buy her ticket, and when she reached the booking-office the train was already in the station.

"Quick, miss! Just in time!" A porter bundled her into a third-class carriage, wondering what such a young girl was doing all a'one at this hour of the night.

So away went Prudence on her solitary flight, clutching a few coins from the purchase of her ticket in her right hand, her hand-bag in her left, and a small attaché case on the seat beside her.

She must see if her remaining stock-in-trade was quite intact. Good gracious! Her heart leapt to

her throat in terror. Frantically she turned out everything the little bag contained, pell-mell on the seat. . . .

And then the devastating truth came home to her! When she had dragged the pound out, somewhere near the railway station, the remaining notes had slipped out too, and they were gone!

Chapter XXI *Sanctuary*

"W] the girl's distraught brain the helpless, hopeless thought was reiterated.

Five shillings and sixpence with which to face the world. No, there was a florin that she hadn't counted! That made seven-and-six.

But—*could* one get a bed in London for that price?

Her lamentable ignorance of life rushed at her like a devastating torrent, almost submerging her with terror.

What was there for a girl like her to do?

The monotonous murmur of the carriage wheels got on her nerves until she could have screamed aloud. They seemed to taunt her with a sound like: "*Noth*-ing . . . *noth*ing . . . *noth*ing!" over and over again, in a jibing refrain.

How long did this train take, until it reached the city?

Twenty minutes past eleven now! London was a long way off. Three hours' journey, wasn't it? That would mean an arrival at nearly half-past two!

Oh, what had she done, to run away like this?

Where could she go, destitute of money, and destitute of friends?

Then she remembered a woman-acquaintance of Janet Mercer's, who was caretaker of a huge block of offices somewhere in the city. Midhurst Buildings was the name. They were old and gloomy, and the woman and her husband had a tiny flat, right at the top, on the eighth floor.

Janet sometimes stayed overnight there, on her infrequent visits to London. She had described the quaint abode to Prudence, who had been much intrigued at the description.

"Like being in a bird's-nest at the top of a very tall tree," Janet had laughed.

Mrs. Smith, the caretaker, had met Prudence once, down in the country, and had hospitably told the girl that if ever she wanted a bed in London, she would put her up.

"But I don't know where Midhurst Buildings are!" thought the frightened run-away, fervently wishing she'd stood her ground at home, and got her nerve together, to tell Mrs. Vansittart, quietly and coherently, how truly innocent she was of the unfortunate affair at Wyndham Towers.

"It will look exactly as though I *were* guilty!" she thought miserably, as the train whirled her at express speed through the night.

But the longest, dreariest journey does come to an end, and at half-past two a.m. the weary girl found herself in the big, deserted terminus, with a few sleepy porters staring curiously at her.

She found herself in the Strand, and tried a quiet-appearing hotel.

But the night-porter wouldn't let her in. It was

strictly against his orders, he told the girl with an unpleasant wink, to admit stray young women without luggage.

Prudence felt great waves of shame sweep over her, and blindly turned away.

Even though it meant courting sure rebuff, she tried another hotel or two, only to meet with similar experience. No, they had no room for her. The wording was sometimes curt, very often brutal, but even when the hotel clerk put it kindly, saying the place was 'full up,' she was made to feel her position keenly.

Twice she asked the way to Midhurst Buildings. No one knew its whereabouts.

Once a furtive-looking creature spoke to her, mumbling something in her ear. Prudence, terrified, turned and ran, not stopping till she reached Charing Cross Station.

There, panting for breath, she leant against the railings, until a burly policeman told her brusquely to 'move on, please.'

Feeling like a criminal, she dragged on to Trafalgar Square. It was an extraordinarily hot night for May, and not a breath of air was stirring.

At the base of the statue to General Gordon, ten down-and-outers slumbered, flotsam and jetsam flung hither and thither by life.

"Shall *I* become like one of these?" thought the heartsick girl, vistas of a friendless future rising up before her, without home, money, friends, or love.

What would Peter Armstrong think, if he could see her now? To-morrow the country-side would ring with the story of the theft. Would he believe her guilty?

This sudden flight would bear out the story, wouldn't it? She hadn't paused to think of that.

Dragging her weary feet onwards, she almost stumbled over a bicycle, with a man sleeping on the ground beside it.

And all around the fountains of Trafalgar Square, some even lying on the parapet of the pools, boots off, and heads hanging over the water, as though threatening every moment to fall in, were slumbering people!

If only she could lie down there and die!

But somewhere deep in the heart of the little country girl, timid of life as undoubtedly she was, there lurked a fighting instinct.

She *would* make good. She *would* live down this hateful story. Circumstances—hateful, cruel as they were—she wasn't going to *let* them keep her down.

Behind all this pain and injustice there must be some good reason. Things *would* work out for the best in the end, if only she had courage, and kept a stout heart.

But—in the meantime—where to lay her head? Hotels wouldn't accept her. It was futile to continue that depressing search.

Across the street she saw a red lamp burning, under the portico of a big church, with a flight of steps going up to the light. Every Londoner knows that lamp of St. Martin's—"the lamp of the doctor of souls," it has been called.

All night long those hospitable doors stand open. Anyone may enter, and find peace. Home of the homeless! Had Prudence only known it, many a brave soldier, clad in full accoutrement, without a place in crowded London to lay his head, spent his last hours in Blighty in that sanctuary, hurrying at dawn to catch the troop train at Victoria.

The girl stood before the ever-burning lamp, and prayed that help might come to her.

A taxi-cab drew up at the bottom of the steps, and the driver jumped down swiftly, opening the door of his vehicle, and holding out a friendly hand to someone inside.

"Come, miss! You're all right now! This is the place I told you of." He half dragged, half lifted, the slim, shabby figure of a very young woman from his cab.

Prudence could see her pale face in the moonlight. There was a dazed look in the eyes.

The driver took her by the arm and led her to the door of the crypt, knocking briskly.

A tall and friendly woman-officer opened to him.

"Come in," she said.

Drawing nearer, in the shadows, Prudence saw the girl pass in, and just caught the taxi-driver whispering to the door-keeper:

"Trying to do herself in, she was . . . I was having a cup of coffee at the Stall by the park, and I heard a kind of sob, and—looking round—I saw her on the grass, behind me. I ran along, and got her, just in the nick of time. Fought like a little wild cat, she did . . . but she's all right now . . . you keep an eye on her. . . ."

Then the gentle voice of the woman-officer, and the door was closed again.

But not for long.

The next comer was a dandified young man in evening clothes, an opera hat at an angle on his scented head.

"Cleaned out at the club, I was . . . and can't get to the banks till morning," Prudence heard him airily

explain to the kind door-keeper, who quietly let him in.

"If only *I* had the courage to go in too," thought she.

A well-dressed, middle-aged man arrived, greatly perturbed.

"Can't get a bed in the whole of London. And no one will cash a cheque for me. I heard that you were always open. . . ."

Soon after that, a boy appeared, and Prudence overheard him say, in an anxious tone:

"I was too late to get into the Y.M.C.A., and they told me you'd take me in. . . ."

Screwing up her courage, she knocked gently at the door of the crypt, and was admitted by the tall and friendly woman-officer, and motioned to a pew. There —with a hassock underneath her tired young head— she lay at full length on the seat, near the memorial tablet to Sir Francis Ba on.

How still and strange and quiet it was! How cool and peaceful! Life's fitful fever swept the streets outside, but in the crypt was mighty calm.

"Like the shelter of a great rock!" thought Prudence.

Quietly the varied pilgrims entered, lying staring up at the low, white, vaulted roof, or at the flag-stones of the floor with their antique inscriptions.

All about were memorial tablets to the famous dead, and cool white pillars.

Prudence watched a shabby boy taking a bench, making a pillow of a Bible and a hassock, and then stretching his tired length on the seat. Almost immediately he fell asleep. She could hear his regular breathing.

The muffled noise of passing taxi cabs seemed very far away, accentuating the succeeding silence.

Great tears crept to Prudence's eyes, and trickled down her cheeks. But—strange to say!—some of the intolerable pain had gone from her sad heart. Hope had sprung up again, and a measure of peace descended.

No nightmare marred her sleep.

She dreamt that she was home again, and happy.

At six o'clock she woke. The night-pilgrims were departing, and London was aroused again. Carts were rumbling in the streets, and everything stirring.

Stiffly she walked out into the early morning, leaving peace of mind behind her. Intense realization of her present position made her young face deeply grave.

She *must* find work to do.

Apart from the financial situation, wasn't work the panacea for all mental ills?

Once she had 'made good,' she would return to Green Gables, and last night's wretched story would be utterly disproved.

She found a coffee-stall, and had a steaming cup, which put new life and strength into her.

Then a wash and brush-up in the railway station, and a setting forth upon the Great Adventure.

Ah, that weary round of the employment agencies! The sickening ache of hope deferred!

"Is there *nothing* I can do?" she broke out once, when an official had been particularly curt to her.

"Best thing *you* can do is go right home to your people," came the brusque reply, as the hard-featured woman turned to a line of female applicants, all struggling to outvie each other and secure any sort of job that would keep body and soul together. "You don't

look fit for hard domestic labour, and you wouldn't get it, anyway, without references. As for anything else, of course, you're quite untrained."

In the depths of her lonely, homesick heart, Prudence realized that the frank words were true—intolerably true.

Chapter XXII *Plain Speaking*

"IT'S a monstrous accusation! It's unbelievably cruel! You've driven a young girl from her home, and you're responsible!"

In the morning-room of Wyndham Towers, Prudence's father stood accusingly before Mrs. Vansittart, who actually quailed before that usually mild man's righteous wrath.

"I know *nothing* beyond what I saw with my own eyes," stuttered the good woman. "The diamonds and the money were missing. Bruce Grimshaw started a search. By a strange coincidence, he began with your daughter, and the diamonds and money tumbled out of her sash——"

"No doubt he *put* them there——" cut in Mr. Page, not caring what he said, so broken-hearted was he over the ghastly occurrence, and his daughter's subsequent flight.

Mrs. Vansittart shook out a nervous laugh.

"Impossible! I've known him all his life, and he's the soul of honour."

"And *I've* known my daughter all her life, and can say the same of her," the distraught man flung back at her.

Mrs. Vansittart wrung her hands.

"I can do nothing. I'm sorry the child has run away, but it's too absurd to hold *me* responsible. If she felt she couldn't face us——"

There was a swish of skirts, a whiff of perfume, and Virginia Dale—in a frilly dress of lavender organdie and a droopy picture-hat that matched exactly—strolled into the room, and then came to sudden anchor as she saw the oddly assorted pair facing each other in such strained fashion.

"I beg your pardon." She was going to retreat, but her hostess—thankful for any sort of interruption—beckoned to her.

"Dear, this is Miss Page's father—Miss Dale." She effected the introduction nervously.

Mr. Page turned towards the scented vision, and bowed stiffly. So this was the sort of artificial product his fresh, sweet young daughter had come in contact with! It was like a primrose trying to compete with an orchid, wasn't it? Well, he knew which type he would prefer. . . .

Virginia bowed distantly, while Mrs. Vansittart nervously murmured:

"*So* unfortunate about last night! Miss Dale was present, so we can speak before her. Virginia, isn't it too dreadful? Little Miss Page has run away from home!"

Virginia tilted her carefully 'plucked' eyebrows to an even higher arch than the barber had already shaped them.

"Really? How very odd!" The words had an insolent drawl to them. "But, of course, it's only temporary. She'll come home."

Mr. Page couldn't endure to have a third party discuss his much-loved child. He turned to go.

"You'll let us know how the search proceeds?" Mrs. Vansittart, moved with compunction at his drawn face and twitching hands, followed him out into the hall. "And if there's anything I can do . . ."

"Nothing. Nothing." The father would die rather than be indebted to this woman in whose house such calamity had befallen his daughter. Then, muttering brokenly something about it's being enough to kill Prudence's mother, he rushed away.

"So terrible, my dear! I declare I'm ready to go off into hysterics! Quick, get Parkins to pour me out some brandy." The lady of the house addressed Virginia, who hastened to the butler's pantry, presently returning with the butler, who bore on a silver tray a bottle, a couple of glasses, and a soda-syphon. "Ah! now I feel better." She dismissed the servant with a nod.

"I'll take some myself," volunteered Miss Virginia coolly, pouring out a liberal libation, and adding soda to it.

Mrs. Vansittart stared at her.

"I thought you'd sworn off, and gone 'on the water wagon,' as you call it."

Virginia drained the glass before she spoke.

"Even doctors think brandy necessary at times. I'm taking this as medicine."

Her hostess tittered disagreeably.

"Medicine? And you as strong as a horse!"

That annoyed Virginia. When irritated, she was capable of rapier thrusts. But that tendency must not be given way to, as her position in the house was scarcely as secure as it had been. Mrs. Vansittart was notoriously fickle in her likings, and recently had shown symptoms of wearying of Virginia.

"I've rather an awkward mission before me," the girl said quietly, hiding her annoyance.

"Huh? What's that? Not on the track of Peter Armstrong again, are you?"

This wasn't diplomatic. But the speaker didn't care. Virginia had shed the light of her countenance too long at Wyndham Towers. Also, she showed no signs of paying back the sixty pounds she owed her hostess. And her important airs were quite absurd, in view of one or two matters with which the older woman was cognizant.

Virginia struggled with her rising temper. She contrived to give her usual cool smile, although just now it was an effort.

"We are great—*friends*."

"And you'd like to be something more?" The stimulant had given Mrs. Vansittart courage for the fray. "And so you're off to hurl the news about the Prudence child right at the man's head, thinking in that way to cure his fancy for her? You're clever, Jinny—but not clever enough—and you DON'T know much about *real* men—men like Peter Armstrong! Why, stupid that you are, don't you realize that that strong type always tends to side with the under-dog—that pity is akin to love—and that you'll only drive him all the faster towards the girl!"

Chapter XXIII *Trapped!*

ON the evening of the long, heart-breaking day in London, when every attempt at finding work had been frustrated, and never in all her life had she felt so utterly *alone*, Prudence hunted feverishly

through a telephone-book for the address of Midhurst Buildings

She could not find it.

She asked a policeman, who informed her that probably such a building would be in the city.

"Take a bus to the Bank of England, then inquire," he advised her.

So—spending three of her few remaining pennies—she boarded a lumbering vehicle, and climbed up to the roof.

"You'd best go in a post office, miss, and have a look at a directory," a policeman near the Bank told her, when she reached the end of her trip. "But I'm afraid all office-buildings will be locked up now. It's nearly eight o'clock."

A post-office official found the address for her.

"You'll have to walk it. It's nearly a mile from here." He gave her intricate directions anent the winding streets and alley-ways that compose the world's financial mart.

Prudence lost her way several times, and was further discomfited by a heavy shower of rain. The night was very close and sultry, and thunder was about. She hated thunder, being terrified of storms.

At last she reached the tall, gloomy buildings where Janet Mercer's friend was caretaker, and on the very doorstep met the woman she sought, accompanied by her husband, who was carrying a suit-case.

"Mrs. Smith . . . it's I, Prudence Page . . . you remember . . . ?"

"Lawks have mercy! Janet Mercer's friend! How are you, my dear? And what brings you to the city?"

Mrs. Smith was genuinely astonished.

Prudence stammered out a vague story about coming to London to find work, and having lost her purse.

"But we'll lend you the money for your fare back, dearie. You'll be going home, of course?"

The girl's pale, tired face flushed up. That flush wasn't lost upon the kindly couple.

"I—I can't go home . . . not in the meantime . . . if you could just give me a bed for to-night . . . you promised you would, any time . . ."

Mrs. Smith exchanged glances with her husband.

"But we've just locked the whole place up for the night. We've got a holiday to-morrow, and we're catching the nine-ten for Westcliffe, to visit my husband's sister."

Tears of fatigue and disappointment rose to Prudence's eyes, so that Mr. Smith—to whom beauty in distress made irresistible appeal—said quickly:

"Maggie, why shouldn't we let her have the flat to-night?"

His wife hesitated. She looked uncertainly at Prudence.

"Wouldn't you be afraid, in that great building, all alone? You could lock the door of the flat, of course . . . it's a parlour, bedroom, kitchen, and box-room, self-contained . . . and you'd be quite safe, of course . . . but still . . ."

Her husband broke in with a hearty:

"Oh, she'd be all right, Maggie! Better for her than an hotel. And we'll be home to-morrow night."

"Thank you very much," said Prudence gently. Gloomy as the outside of the great building was, the flat promised refuge. And she hadn't any money for hotels!

So the caretaker and his wife, greatly wondering at her advent in the city, took her up in the lift to the eighth floor, and let her into their private premises.

"There's electric light, and I'll change the sheets of the bed in a jiffy." Capable Mrs. Smith soon had everything in readiness for the unexpected guest. "And there's bread and tea and sugar in the cupboard, and some eggs. You can use the gas-cooker."

Then the pair had to hurry off to catch their train.

It was rather eerie in the flat, perched up so high above the world, and Prudence undressed quickly, climbing into the enormous feather bed.

No sooner was she there than—horror of horrors!—thunder broke outside in a fury, the lightning flashed, the rain came down in torrents!

Prudence crawled below the bedclothes, trembling.

But the storm raged on and on, growing louder, till the crashes seemed directly overhead, and the room was brilliant with lightning. The rain poured down as though all the waters of the universe had been let loose.

Prudence had read about the terrible air-raids in the Great War, but none ever had been louder or more intimidating than this ghastly storm!

Suddenly, the building seemed to totter as crash after crash deafened the crouching girl. She cried aloud in terror.

Above the storm, she heard the sharp ting-ting of the telephone beside the bed.

With trembling fingers she lifted the receiver from its hook.

There was a long and eerie pause, and then a hoarse voice trickling from far away, across the wires.

"Hello! Hello! Midhurst Buildings?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Is it true that you're on fire? The lightning hit a wire on the roof connecting with the motor-room, and——"

The receiver fell from Prudence's fingers as she leapt straight out of bed and to the door. She shot the bolt back, and a wave of terrific heat nearly overcame her as flames from the blazing staircase swirled almost to her feet! *The whole building was on fire!*

"Help! Help!" she screamed, slamming the door shut tight, and rushing to the windows.

But above the thunder nothing could be heard.

She staggered to the telephone, caught up the receiver, and shouted: "Fire! Send the fire brigade! Midhurst Buildings . . . Wharf Street!"

For a moment the storm lulled, and outside the bedroom door she could now hear the roar of the flames and the terrible crash of falling debris. The room became suffocatingly hot. . . .

The girl sank down upon her knees, and prayed. Eight stories up! Was any ladder long enough to reach her? Would help come in time to save her from an awful death?

She staggered to the window. She was almost suffocated by smoke, and the heat was so terrific that it seemed to her as though her very hair was scorching.

Eight stories up! The sheer drop down to the street was a ghastly thing to contemplate, but—terror-stricken as she was—she felt that she *must* jump and end her misery.

Above the roar of the flames there came a sudden clatter, and the clamorous ringing of bells. The *fire-brigade!*

"Help! Help!" shouted Prudence at the eighth-floor window.

But she could barely hear the sound of her own voice above the thunder and the conflagration just behind her.

"Can they see me?" was her agonized thought.

She caught up a white cover from the dressing-table, sweeping brushes and toilet articles to the floor, and desperately waved the piece of linen.

There was a flash of lightning at that moment, and the firemen saw her.

"Stiff job, boys!" remarked their leader coolly. "We'll need the 85-foot escape to get the woman out, and it'll take a bit of skill, at that!"

Smashing the glass in a fire-call pillar that fortunately was near by, car after car arrived, and in a jiffy the longest ladder possible was placed against the building.

Two firemen swarmed up, but to Prudence it seemed an eternity before their helmets showed about ten feet below her.

The ladder was not long enough!

Despair entered her soul. This was the end. There was no hope!

But she did not understand the cleverness and resource of the profession which—for sheer daredevilry and bravery—can't be beaten.

"Hi there! Catch!"

A young, strong face under its gleaming helmet was directed towards her, and the end of a rope came whizzing through the air.

Prudence—leaning far out—strained to capture it, but it passed through her shaking fingers, slipping down.

"Try again! Easy! Take your time!"

At last she caught it, holding on for dear life.

"Tie it round the bed-post," shouted the stentorian voice beneath. "Take lots of rope. Firm!"

The girl stumbled back into the room, whose heat was now insufferable. In a minute more, the door would surely burst in, and bed and everything be an inferno.

But she contrived to tie the knot securely. The bed was old and very heavy.

Violent twitchings of the rope. Prudence staggered to the window and saw one of the firemen climb, hand over hand, up the rope, while the other fellow held it taut.

"Here we are, lady! Keep your nerve!" The man sprang through. "Not a moment to lose! Grab tight round my neck, and hang on for dear life!"

"Save me! Oh, save me!" cried the trembling girl.

She flung her two arms round the man's neck, but alas! there was no strength in them, no holding power!

He hesitated for the fraction of a second. None of his 'stunts' had ever been more dangerous! This young 'un would let go, for a certainty, and if he hadn't a tight grip of her, would fall 115 feet to the street below.

"Nobody here but you?"

"No, no one. The caretakers are away——"

At that moment, with a gigantic roar, the door gave way, and a mass of flames burst into the apartment, hell let loose. . . .

Without further parley, the fireman grabbed Pru-

dence round the waist, and flung her like a sack over his right shoulder. Then he swung himself over the sill, and lowered her 10 feet to his companion, who contrived to steady her, and at last they got her to the ground.

To Prudence, half-unconscious though she was, that terrible descent was for ever imprinted on her brain. Each moment she expected death.

Then, vaguely, she realized that a white-coated man who must have been a doctor, and a woman in a dark blue uniform, were bending over her in the rain, and that some stinging hot stuff was being forced between her lips.

"Narrow escape with her hair," she heard some one in the crowd say. "The fireman must have put it out——"

Put *what* out?

The fiery liquid sent a glow throughout her body. She tried to raise herself on one elbow, but, at the movement, a sharp pain shot through her, and she sank back with a little cry.

Thereafter, everything was blurred and indistinct, until she woke up in a little low-roofed room lit by lamps that jogged incessantly. Even the couch was shaking, and the walls moved up and down!

Odd, wasn't it?

"Lie still, dear. You're all right." The woman in the uniform bent over her, and Prudence could see the white-coated man sitting on a jerking sofa opposite.

Was she dizzy? Was that why the room was jogging so?

"Where am I?" she asked faintly, of the woman.

The white-coated man leant over, smiling. He had a nice face.

"In the ambulance. We're going to the hospital. But you needn't be afraid. No damage done, as far as we can ascertain."

In Prudence's brain a memory stirred. Something about her hair, wasn't it? Now, *what* had happened to her hair?

If she raised herself a little, she'd be able to see her reflection in a glass upon the wall.

And when she did contrive to do that, what she saw was so astounding and so terrible that she sank back with a cry of fear!

Chapter XXIV *Virginia's Victory*

AFTER the encounter with Prudence's father in the morning room of Wyndham Towers, Mrs. Vansittart had annoyed Virginia—"the-guest-who-outstayed-her-welcome"—more than the good lady thought.

'Baiting' the spoilt beauty was a rare occurrence. Virginia's natural conceit was so colossal, so impregnable, that it took many harsh truths to 'go home.'

Indeed, Virginia had cultivated the fine philosophy that she was above criticism.

But to-day some of Mrs. Vansittart's remarks had penetrated even her thick skin.

Like the heel of Achilles, Peter Armstrong was the one weak spot in her armour of conceit.

And her blunt hostess had as good as said that Peter loved the unfortunate Prudence Page, and had no interest in herself!

"You don't know much about real men!"

That wouldn't have hurt Virginia in the slightest, were it not for the implication it contained.

Mrs. Vansittart had meant that she hadn't got the key to Peter's heart.

"That strong type of man always sides with the under dog."

Ah! *that* made Virginia pause and think!

Most certainly, at the present juncture of affairs, Prudence Page was the 'under dog.' Last night, every one's hand had turned against her. Virginia had enjoyed the scene.

She had enjoyed seeing Mr. Page's face this morning, too.

But, afterwards, Mrs. Vansittart's words had rankled. If she—Virginia—wasn't going to have a chance with Peter, what good of overthrowing Prudence Page?

Her hostess had criticized her for setting forth to break the news to Peter.

"You'll only drive him all the faster towards the girl!"

As she walked along the country roads in her frilly gown of lavender organdie—carefully chosen because Peter liked quaint gowns of a by-gone period, and Virginia thought the revived fashion reminded him of his mother—the girl's brain was busy with a host of schemes.

She was a born plotter, was Virginia.

Some simple little souls, like Prudence Page, were born to love and trust and make one man extremely happy.

But Virginia was a subtler type, a real adventuress. Scheming was second nature to her.

And always . . . *always* . . . did herself come first!

Yet—curious fact!—it was the chivalry in Peter Armstrong's nature that had caught her vagrant fancy.

"I may be a rotter myself, but I'd *never* marry a rotter," she had once flung at Bert Traymore, in a rare moment of complete frankness, when the latter had annoyed her by some shady trick, and then come whining for comfort.

But—to herself—she admitted that Peter's rapid advance in the scientific world, and the fact that one day he would make a fortune through his inventive skill, were distinct drawing-cards in his favour.

He was making lots of money now, she ascertained through various channels. (Virginia had her scouts out, everywhere.) He could have bought one of the nicest houses in the neighbourhood, had he so fancied, instead of living like a humble recluse at Pear-Tree Cottage.

But—once married to him—she'd soon spend his money!

The day was unusually warm for the season of the year, and as Virginia sauntered along the country roads, the wren in the beech-wood burst into ecstatic singing, and the sedge-warbler in the reed-beds piped up, too.

The warmth (for Virginia was a regular salamander, and adored sunshine and heat) gave her a sentimental sort of feeling which was foreign to her.

"I do believe I'm actually in love with Peter Armstrong!" she told herself, with an excited laugh.

In that case—hateful though Mrs. Vansittart's plain-spoken words had been—it would be well to keep them in mind when dealing with the chivalrous fellow.

"I must play the clinging kitten!" thought the plotter, and thanked her lucky stars she hadn't yielded to an impulse to try and borrow money from the man, when her losses at bridge had driven her rather hard, and he had seemed a 'soft mark.'

When she reached Pear-Tree Cottage, old Nannie grumpily informed her that Mr. Armstrong was out, and she didn't know when the inventor would be home again.

"She's lying," thought Virginia, but contrived to keep a dazzling smile upon her lips, for it would be best to 'keep in' with this old woman who was Peter's servant. "I'll tip her, and that will unloose her tongue."

Old Nannie took the tip, but unfolded no further information beyond the fact that Mr. Armstrong hadn't said when he would be back, and she herself was going home as usual to her little cottage in the woods 'round eight o'clock,' after the place was 'redded up for the night.'

"So you don't stay here after eight," remarked Virginia. Old Nannie didn't hear her, nor could she guess the plan that was forming in the visitor's mind.

Out in the woods a restless cuckoo called. Virginia smiled an odd little smile as she heard it.

"To-night the nightingale will sing," she told herself. Oh yes, the setting would be perfect! What with Peter's chivalry, and the nightingale, and her own appealing beauty, the plot would work all right!

Peter Armstrong strode through the woods in a short cut to Pear-Tree Cottage.

The afternoon was amazingly hot, and he was in a

disappointed frame of mind, for his quest for a certain chemical essential to an experiment he wished to conduct to-day, had proved fruitless.

That meant a trip to town to-morrow, and he hated London.

He could telegraph, of course, but the manufacturers were so stupid that they'd probably misunderstand his order, and he'd better go himself.

Infernal nuisance!

All the more so as he'd planned to call on Miss Prudence Page to-morrow.

He couldn't call on her to-day because that thesis for the *Scientific News* must be finished and mailed to-night.

He drew his watch out. Nearly five o'clock. The last post went at half-past eight.

He knew he wasn't in a writing mood.

Queer how his peace of mind had been assailed, of late.

When he came to this tiny haven—Pear-Tree Cottage—little did he imagine it would be in any woman's power to stir his heart again.

Five years ago, his one and only love-affair had ended with a smash. The girl had valued money higher than hearts, and ruthlessly had thrown him over.

He had been badly hit. Forsworn all women, for the future. His idealism, he told himself, had gone for good.

And now . . .?

Odd how the sweetness and simple beauty of the little lady of Green Gables had touched him! She was just a girl . . . a child! Somehow she called forth all his chivalry, his protective instincts.

When he saw her at Wyndham Towers, for instance, among all the preening peacocks, he wanted to carry her off to safety, away from the sound of their raucous laughter and their cackling tongues.

A white butterfly flickered across his path as he emerged from the woods. Before him, the heated air quivered above the meadow grass. Extraordinarily warm for this time of the year, wasn't it? He wouldn't be a bit surprised if there were thunder, later.

Arrived at Pear-Tree Cottage, he went into his laboratory to write.

Such a struggle to collect his thoughts! Prudence . . . the white butterfly . . . the sound of the wood-wren trilling joyously in the high beeches . . . they were all jumbled together in his thoughts.

Prudence . . . and beauty! Everything in nature that was lovely he connected with that pretty maid.

Such a contrast to those women at the Towers!

Why did her mother let her visit there, a dove among the peacocks? Didn't Prudence realize how ready they all were—these less attractive women—to tear her to pieces?

But no . . . she was too innocent, too good, to understand lesser natures.

And—here his heart gave an odd little stab—she trusted that unreliable, shallow puppy of a Traymore, although his character was patent to the world!

"I brought your tea, sir," mumbled old Nannie at the door of the laboratory, tray in hand.

Peter looked up from his papers, absently.

"Oh yes. Very good of you, I'm sure." He rose at once and took the tray from her, as though she'd been a duchess.

Old Nannie, in her queer way, adored him.

"I'll lay your supper, before I go, sir. In the sitting-room."

"Thank you. I shan't want anything till after half-past eight."

The old woman stood, hesitating, a hand on the door-knob.

Should she—or should she not—tell him of 'that hussy's' advent?

She had taken Virginia's half-crown, it is true, but, according to her code of ethics, it involved no special loyalty to the designing creature.

Her master went on scribbling, his untouched tea beside him.

Yes, he'd be heaps better with a wife to look after him, thought the old woman, but *never* one like that there Miss Virginia Dale, or whatever high-flown name she called herself. She was no good, not she. Hadn't the third housemaid at the Towers—who was Nannie's granddaughter, and even though a bit flighty, like all young gals were nowadays, had good common sense—hadn't Minnie told her grandma that Miss Dale was no real lady, despite her airs?

And it was plain to see, the way she chased young Mr. Armstrong, and he so unsuspecting. . . .

He looked up now, smiling abstractedly at her

"Well, what is it, Nannie? Anything you want to say?"

"Nothing, sir, except that this morning a lady called to see you. I told her as I didn't know rightly when you'd be back."

"Who was she?"

For a foolish moment he hoped it might be Prudence!

"The young lady from the Towers, sir. The one with the grand clothes and the perfume."

Disapproval was in every line of the old, nut-cracker face. Peter could scarcely keep a smile back.

"That's all right, Nannie. You needn't wait." He nodded her away. "And I'm not at home to any callers, please."

The visitor had been Virginia Dale, without a doubt. Odd how the girl sought out his company!

Then he forgot the incident in complete immersion in his task.

It was after eight when he had finished, and he just caught the last mail at the local post office, dropping his bulky envelope in the box.

He took a long walk after that, and it was almost half-past nine before he returned to his abode.

A light was burning in the sitting-room. The shade was drawn.

Now that seemed queer, as old Nannie never stayed later than eight o'clock.

Peter let himself in by latch-key, and—to his amazement—heard a woman's voice gaily greet him with a:

"Welcome, Peter!"

"To what," said Peter Armstrong coolly, one hand on the door-knob of the little sitting-room of Pear-Tree Cottage, and a flash of steel in his usually calm eyes "To what am I indebted for the unexpected pleasure of this visit?"

The fact that Virginia Dale—her beauty enhanced by candlelight—was at her loveliest at that moment, and that most men would have found her irresistible, weighed with him not one jot.

He despised her for the huntress that she was, and

some of the scorn showed clearly on his clean-cut, manly face.

Virginia, who had risen to her feet at the head of the little table she herself had arranged so artistically for their supper, *tête-à-tête*, contrived to keep the coy smile on her lips, although uncomfortable qualms assailed her.

"I came to keep you company, you hermit!" She tilted up her head provocatively. "And I'm beginning to think you're not exactly pleased to see me!" The titter which followed this challenging remark as good as stated that it was madness to doubt for a moment that all men MUST be pleased to see her!

But Peter's stern face did not relax a jot.

"Might I inquire how you got in?"

"Through the back-door."

"A-ah!' He drew the monosyllable out, significantly, and his unexpected visitor flushed at his intonation.

"You aren't very cordial, I must say." She tossed her head. "And I brought you such a lovely supper. Caviare—I've made the toast, you see—and *pâté de foie gras* sandwiches, and cold salmon I wangled from the cook, and a bottle of '98 claret——"

Peter's lip curled.

"If on charitable mission, why not take the food to a more deserving cause? As for myself, it's wasted on me. I like plain fare, and Nannie has already prepared my supper."

Virginia very nearly lost her temper. But, struggling for dignity, she contrived to say:

"I'm sorry if I've intruded where I'm so obviously not wanted, and that my little 'surprise party' has

failed. I'll go at once." Then, with a sudden brain-wave, and realizing that coyness as a weapon with this man had for ever failed, she added:

"I only came because I wanted your advice on an important matter. I'd never have come for myself. It's for some one else, who's in great trouble. You know the Page girl who lives at Green Gables?"

Ah! that shot went home. A quick concern, a vivid interest, replaced the cool scorn in his eyes.

"Nothing happened to her?" For the life of him, he couldn't keep the eagerness out of his voice. "You said she was in trouble?"

"Yes. Will your majesty condescend to sit down at the table, as I'm hungry? I'll tell you all about it, then."

Peter seated himself reluctantly. The whole proceedings were highly unconventional, but he must get at the bottom of her cryptic utterances anent the one girl in the world who mattered.

"You can give me a cup of tea, please. I don't want anything else."

Virginia saw his perturbation, and she remembered Mrs. Vansittart's word of warning. She must tread warily here.

"Of course you understand that I *don't* in the least believe her guilty," she began, assuming a timid, depreciatory manner quite foreign to her usual self-assurance. "But the whole affair was *most* unfortunate. And then, on the top of it, her running away from home——"

"Great heavens! What do you mean?" Peter half rose to his feet. "Speak out, can't you?"

So Virginia, immensely chagrined over this proof of his deep interest in the 'Page chit,' told her tale

—and told it cleverly. She was 'frightfully sorry' for the girl. They were all 'down' on her, and of course circumstances did look rather odd . . . but she—Virginia—had stood by Prudence Page, and always would. Etc. and etc.

"And between you all, you've driven the child—that innocent child—out of her home?" half shouted Peter, not caring in the slightest what Virginia thought of him.

"Not I, Peter dear." Virginia took advantage of his agitation to lean over and clasp his hand in her own perfumed, highly-manicured fingers.

With a wary eye on the fleeting moments, she kept him on the subject of Prudence's downfall.

"She'll be home to-morrow, sure as sure." She tried to reassure her *vis-à-vis*.

It was nearly half-past ten o'clock when Peter—seeing the time—said, hurriedly:

"I say, you'll have to go, or all the tongues in the neighbourhood will be wagging! I—I appreciate your coming, now that I know your motive"—he got that out somehow, and he meant it, too—"I'm going to do what I can to help the Pages find their daughter, and—and clear her—though of course it's absurd to think—to suspect——"

Just then, there was a flash of lightning, and a terrific peal of thunder shook the frail old cottage. Virginia, who hated storms and whom thunder and lightning literally prostrated, screamed, and hid her face.

"Oh! Oh! We'll be killed! We'll be killed!"

"It's all right," Peter reassured his shaking guest. He was worried that he couldn't get her away at once, for fear of Mrs. Grundy—but he couldn't turn her out

into the storm, especially as the rain was coming down in bucketfuls. "It will pass very soon."

It didn't pass, however. It grew worse. It seemed as though the very heavens had opened.

Virginia's fears were not assumed. She clung to Peter as though he were her one hope of safety, begging him not to leave her for an instant, forcing him to promise she could stay until the storm had ended.

After nearly an hour had passed, and the thunder and lightning and rain showed no signs of abating, he offered to run to another house and telephone Mrs. Vansittart, to assure her of Virginia's safety.

At that, even in the midst of her terror, a sly, calculating look showed for a moment in Virginia's eyes, had Peter only seen it.

"I'm often as late as this. Don't leave me. I couldn't bear to be here, all by myself . . . I couldn't."

She clung to him, and he could see her bosom rise and fall in uncontrollable agitation.

"Mrs. Grundy must be ignored, then." He tried to reassure her, but he felt uncomfortable, and cursed this inconvenient storm that detained her in his cottage to this hour.

Time passed. The storm did not abate, but only seemed to grow the fiercer. A tree was struck by lightning in a neighbouring field, and once Peter thought the cottage itself had been hit, it rocked so drunkenly.

To make matters worse, Virginia herself collapsed, and lay moaning on the sofa, clinging for dear life to his arm.

It was after three a.m. before a lull came, and he contrived to get her back to Wyndham Towers.

AT ten o'clock in the morning, Peter Armstrong sat in the corner of a railway carriage that was bowling him swiftly to town, his thoughts gravitating between Prudence Page and the highly awkward situation last night's storm had got him into!

He was no special stickler as to etiquette, but he hated to think he might have been the unwitting means of gossip centring unpleasantly round Miss Virginia Dale.

He had hitherto misjudged Virginia. She wasn't the artificial creature he had thought her, quite devoid of heart or womanly impulse. Why! before the storm prostrated her, she had shown herself to be cram full of sympathy for the other girl, kind and considerate, and anxious to vindicate the other's honour.

It was the very irony of fate that, having come to his cottage on such a praiseworthy mission, and being unavoidably storm-bound, Virginia's own reputation might be now at stake!

What could he do about it?

And *where* was Prudence Page?

As Virginia, with obvious common sense, had pointed out to him, it had been stupid of the child to run away, thus giving a semblance of truth to the hateful tale in circulation!

Her action had affected others, too. Virginia had told him that never in all her life had she seen a man so stricken as Prudence's father was, and as for Mrs. Page, the poor soul was utterly prostrated.

It was Prudence's flight that had brought Virginia on the errand which led her to be storm-bound, and

—as ill-luck would have it—hadn't they encountered Talkative Tom, the village gossip, on their way up to the Towers at dawn, and the tale of Virginia's nocturnal sojourn would be common property by now!

A wave of resentment entered Peter's thoughts of Prudence, who indirectly had brought about this 'impasse.'

But, just the same, he yearned to find her.

The train darted through the sunlit landscape which bore everywhere traces of last night's wrath. Many trees had been blown down, and a lot of damage had been done

Peter arrived in town at last, and had his lunch. As he emerged from the restaurant *en route* to buy his chemicals, he made a purchase of an early edition of the evening paper. Running like a refrain through his mind was the urge to find Prudence, and—though there wasn't the faintest chance her doings would be chronicled in the daily press—a vague hope stirred him that there *might* be news of her.

A heading on the front-page caught his eye immediately.

"TERRIBLE FIRE IN CITY BUILDINGS."

Well, that was to be expected, wasn't it? One didn't have a storm like that for nothing.

Then the sub-heading:

"YOUNG GIRL CAUGHT IN BLAZE."

Stupid how his heart thumped at the recollection of another 'young girl,' though of course it wasn't . . .

Heavens! It *was*! Same name! There must be

some mistake . . . a mistaken identity . . . ! No! No! The description *tallied*!

Clutching the paper, physically unable to read another word of it, Peter staggered against the station railings.

"Wot's up, Guv'nor?" asked the newsboy sympathetically.

Peter did not answer.

"Something in the pyper, eh?" The boy advanced, and took the sheet from the shaking fingers.

Peter pointed at the headlines dumbly.

"Oh, *that*!" The newsboy, hardened to calamities, shrugged his thin shoulders. "Narsty, wot? But nobody seriously 'urt, so why worry?"

Peter came to.

"Did you say nobody was hurt? Here, quick, give me the paper."

He grabbed it from the boy

"Nobody badly 'urt, sir. Strite, I'm tellin' you the truth. Young gal brought down from the eighth floor . . . alone in the building she was . . ."

Peter's eye raced down the sheet.

Beyond the bald statement that Prudence Page was in a London hospital, there was nothing that might give a clue to her condition.

The description of her rescue had been lurid, and the reporters had given all the space to that, and to the fire itself, the damage being estimated at £100,000.

"What hospital?" cried Peter. "Where is she?"

"Wot'll you give me if I tell you, Guv'nor?" flung back the urchin. "A pal o' mine who was there when the ambulance came, told me this morning."

Peter pushed a note into his hand.

"Quick! The address!"

The boy's fingers curled round the money.

"She's in a ward at the St. Francis, near Liverpool Street Station. The bus'll take you down in fifteen minutes."

But Peter had already hailed a taxi, and was off.

* * * * *

When Prudence—jogging in the ambulance to the St. Francis Hospital—caught sight of her own reflection in a looking-glass that hung on the wall, she gave a cry of terror.

"That isn't me! That isn't me!"

A coal-black face, the eyes showing with a strange white gleam in the surrounding darkness, gazed menacingly at her. And—merciful heavens!—the creature in the mirror had no hair!

She sank back on the pillow, trembling, while the nurse bent over her and tried to soothe her.

"Don't be alarmed, dear. People always look like that when they've been in a fire. The smoke and dirt, you know. We'll wash it off whenever we get you to hospital, and you'll be your old self again."

"But my hair——?" Prudence put a hand up to what had been her 'crowning glory.' It was gone!

"Never you mind, dear. It'll grow in no time," said the kindly nurse. "The flames must have got it."

Prudence's lips trembled at the recollection of her terrible escape . . . the dizzy descent on the 85-foot ladder.

"Was the fireman hurt?" she whispered. "I—I don't mind about myself if he—he's safe?"

"He's all right. Lie still and rest."

Afterwards, in the hospital, another nurse looked after her.

Prudence didn't want her people to be told about the fire. The excitement of the news might kill her mother.

The nurse looked at her in amazement.

"As like as not, it'll be in all the papers, dear. We'd better wire."

Prudence gave in. She was too weak to argue, and a tremendous longing overcame her to see her mother's beloved face, to hear her reassuring voice.

She had acted wrongly in running off. A coward's part! The fire had been her punishment.

But oh! that terrible accusation at Wyndham Towers! She couldn't return to her home until she was cleared in the eyes of every one!

Every one! That included Peter Armstrong! Strange how she no longer cared what Bert Traymore thought of her!

But oh! she longed for Peter's good opinion. She couldn't bear to go down in his estimation.

It was nearly ten o'clock before the wire was sent off to her people, and at that time Peter Armstrong was on his way to London.

"Keep her quiet all morning," was the doctor's orders when he made his rounds.

Prudence was in a semi-private ward, its only occupant. The other bed was vacant.

The nurse flitted in and out in her white gown and apron, and her smartly ruffled cap. She wasn't very old, herself, and had taken quite a fancy to the romantic-looking little invalid.

For—despite her burnt locks—Prudence still looked

pretty, once her face was washed of grime and soot.

About twelve o'clock, the young nurse entered with a huge pair of scissors.

"I'm going to fix that hair of yours, before your people see you! And maybe your 'best boy' will be arriving, too!"

Prudence flushed warmly.

"I haven't got a 'best boy,'" she replied.

The young nurse laughed.

"What? With those eyes of yours? I don't believe it! Just you mark my words, he'll be arriving pretty soon, and in a perfect ferment over you! Sit up a little, dear, and let me even off the piece behind your left ear . . . So!"

Snip! Snip! Burnt locks on the counterpane.

The nurse brushed them away.

"You look a hundred per cent. better now. Like a lovely boy! Here! Look!" And she thrust a hand-glass into Prudence's fingers.

"Oh!" Prudence drew out the monosyllable, as she stared at the strange image in the mirror. "Oh, what on earth will mother say?"

The nurse laughed gaily.

"Just you tell her it's the newest kind of 'bob.' But don't you worry, dear! She'll be so almighty glad to have you, safe and sound, that she wouldn't care if you were bald! But, believe me, it's becoming, is that coiffure!"

And she flitted off to other duties.

Prudence had a light lunch at one o'clock, then 'rested,' with the shades drawn down.

But the white-washed room was full of subdued, golden light, and from the streets the sounds of traffic came, so that sleep was very far away.

It was after two when the nurse came down the corridor, and peeped in at her patient.

"Awake? That's lucky, for HE'S here!" she announced, with a twinkle.

Prudence blinked at her.

"Who's here? My father?"

"No. Guess again."

"I—I couldn't." The girl's heart beat fast. "Who is it?"

The nurse laughed teasingly.

"Didn't I tell you he would come? And I admire your taste, too. He's so handsome, and—by the way he's been going on—just crazy over you. Well, shall I show him along? I can't keep him standing in the corridor, now that Sister's given him permission to see you."

Before Prudence could ask another question, or protest, the pretty nurse had disappeared, and presently was heard returning down the corridor. . . .

"Here's your visitor. Only ten minutes allowed." She ushered a tall, stalwart figure into the little ward, and at once withdrew, closing the door behind her.

Prudence's heart missed a beat as in two strides Peter Armstrong crossed the floor, stooped down beside the bed and took her two hands in his big, strong clasp that seemed to say:

"I've got you now . . . *and never, never* shall I let you go again!"

Chapter XXVI *The Enchanted Kiss*

IN the narrow hospital bed, Prudence looked up at Peter Armstrong, her heart afire with a strange, new ecstasy she had never known before . . . no,

never in the blinding period of infatuation for the worthless Traymore . . . never in all her thoughtless girlhood!

The girl was speechless. Great emotion somehow makes words seem so futile and so weak.

She *loved* this big, strong man as she had never known it possible to love.

She would *always* love him. Something greater than herself, something infinitely stronger, something as old as the hills, as permanent, and yet with all the freshness and the newness and the fragrance of the spring had caught her, never to let her go again.

Love!

The thing that poets, from time immemorial, have sung about.

The thing that makes the world go round.

The one thing in the world worth having, and indeed—without which—life must be ever incomplete.

She—Prudence Page—had never guessed there was such throbbing ecstasy, such a flow of nameless loveliness as beat about her heart just now, when Peter Armstrong, bending over the hospital cot, caught her fluttering fingers in his own strong grasp, and looked long, and deep, and wordlessly, into her hitherto unawakened eyes.

The nurse had gone, and they were alone . . . alone with the amazing discovery that brought a hot, delicious flow to Prudence's very temples.

"Peter!"

"My little girl!"

Oh! magic words!

Had she dreamt them? Was this some fantasy of her own imagination? Would she wake up and find

herself once more in the white-walled ambulance, and the nurse bending over her and telling her she must lie quiet ?

But no ! The nurse's presence never had held enchantment such as this ! The nurse's touch had never generated magic such as flowed in a strong, steady current from Peter's big, brown fingers, rushing in a surge of loveliness to the girl's heart.

There was silence in the little ward, save for the hum of traffic from the street below . . . and—what was that ?—something that beat about them like the throb of violoncellos, like the perfume of honeysuckle in the moonlight, like the song of nightingales.

Love !

The thing that sets young hearts afire. The thing that brings such poignant pain, and yet whose sweetness is so potent, so intoxicating, that—for one hour of it—one would recklessly endure all pangs, all future sorrows.

Long and deep did Peter look into the eyes of Prudence Page.

How deep and dark and true they were, those eyes ! What purity, what wistfulness, what longing, lay behind them !

And who was he to wake this little sleeping princess ?

But he was human, and he loved her. Loved as he never thought it possible to love. The agony of mind of the last hour had shown him, clearly, all that this young girl meant to him.

He bent his head down lower, and an arm slipped round her shoulders, holding her fast. How very nearly he had lost her ! With her clipped, boyish little head, and that pale, lovely little face, there

was something immeasurably appealing, something that roused every instinct of protection. . . .

"My . . . little . . . girl!"

The words were out now. She had heard them. A wild-rose colour stained the gardenia-whiteness of her face.

And then——

How he ever had the courage, afterwards he never knew. But, without any further parley, his lips—reverently adoring, passionately tender—were on her lips, in a long, enchanted kiss that seemed to have no end.

Even the traffic down below seemed hushed at that enchanted moment. In a breathless silence, all the world was waiting. . . .

"I love him! I shall *always* love him! He is mine . . . *mine* . . . *mine!*" In Prudence's heart the song of ecstasy was being sung as though by angel choirs.

But, none the less, an age-old instinct in her made her draw back first.

Would he—this wonder-man—think her 'easy,' 'cheap'?

This sudden surrender, without any preliminary wooing . . .? In calmer moments, would he think the less of her for it?

She drew her 'bobbed' head away from him, shaking out a tremulous little laugh that somehow seemed to break the magic spell like the tinkle of falling glass.

There were tremulous tears behind that laugh.

"I—we—we *shouldn't*—should we?"

Peter put his two hands on her slender shoulders, and in a voice that shook with feeling, said:

"If there's any reason *why* we shouldn't, won't you tell me, and—and let me show you just how foolish all such reasons must be—darling?"

Like a flash, the thought of Traymore darted through his mind.

With all the honest contempt of a very genuine, honourable nature, Peter despised the Traymores of this world. They preyed on women. They were liars.

Words, indeed, were feeble to describe them, though a few apt phrases had drifted across the Atlantic Ocean . . . such as 'lounge-lizards,' 'parlour-snakes.'

To the clean-cut mind of Peter, Traymore was a leech of the most poisonous type.

But—did this unsophisticated little girl still cherish an interest in him?

Why was there such a hesitant look upon her face?

Then he remembered the recent strain she had come through, and a wave of self-reproach caught him. He cursed himself for a blundering fool.

"I—I'm awfully sorry. Your nurse will give me no end of a talking-to, if she knew the way I—I'd upset you." He gazed anxiously at the invalid. "I'm a selfish beast to come here and think only of myself, and the way *I* feel about you, and forget how weak you are, and everything."

Prudence tried to laugh again, but a lump had crept into her throat.

"I'm all right. A narrow escape, wasn't it?"

Despite her valiant attempt at nonchalance, the tears were shimmering in her eyes now—tears of weakness and of happiness and a whole variety of emotions that mere man could never understand.

Why did he stand there, so far off, who should have been so near?

But for the very life of her, she couldn't put her wishes into words. Love made one shy and humble and distrustful of oneself, didn't it?

He drew a chair near the bed, his fine eyes on her face.

Haltingly, she told him the story of the fire, and her own hair-raising experiences.

She tried to laugh over the adjective.

"Hair-*raising*, it should be spelt." She passed a hand over her bobbed locks. "Nurse trimmed it a bit with the scissors just before you came. She—she was sure you would be coming——"

Then, with a vivid blush, Prudence realised how queer the last phrase must sound to him.

Peter leant forward in his chair, his face alight.

"You told her about me, then?"

"No. Oh no." She shook her head.

Inwardly he thought:

"She must have told the nurse about *some one*? Some *man*?"

Had she expected Traymore?

We are told that true love casts out doubt, but in real life, it isn't always so.

Peter was human, with a man's power of loving, and a man's jealousy when he does set his heart idolatrously on woman.

Had it not been only the trouble at Wyndham Towers that had forced Prudence to leave home and run away, but had her flight been planned in order to meet Traymore up in town?

The thought was an unworthy one, but it persisted, torturingly, in Peter's mind.

Was she expecting Traymore at the hospital?

Did she love the fellow?

Had her recent surrender to his—Peter's—kiss been merely the instinct of an invalid to cling to a familiar hand, or was Prudence a coquette bent on collecting 'scalps,' enjoying the shallow thrill of each new declaration?

Although he did not know it, Virginia's hints had sown the dangerous seeds of doubt. . . .

"If you are expecting some one, then I'll go." He tried to make the phrase sound easy, but the words were stilted.

Prudence, with a quick surge of the heart, realised that he was jealous, and hastened to set his mind at rest.

"I'm only expecting my people. Father and mother. Nurse sent a wire to them. She said they would be in a terrible state if they heard about the fire, and maybe not knowing——"

Here she broke off. The part she had played in running off, like a coward, struck her forcibly, and she wondered what Peter could be thinking of her?

Had he heard that hateful story of the theft?

But if he loved her . . . and he *must* love her, for he had grown to mean so *much* to her! . . . he surely couldn't credit such a calumny?

But she couldn't tell him of it. No! She would break down and cry, and thoroughly humiliate herself, were she to broach the painful subject.

"How did you find me out?" (She must say something, no matter what, for Peter was looking at her strangely, as though she were some one whom he scarcely knew!)

"I came up to town on business this morning.

Then, in the street, I bought an early edition of an evening paper, and read about the fire. When I saw your name, I couldn't believe my eyes! The newsboy told me what hospital you were in, and I came on at once."

Prudence's eyes widened.

"I've caused a terrible lot of trouble." Her lip trembled, rather like a child's who has done wrong. "I didn't mean to make a fuss. Things got unbearable—oh, I can't explain it—and I was a coward, and ran away—"

She looked piteously up at him, eyes brimming over, and put out a hand to touch his coat.

Peter trembled with an emotion that was a queer mixture of protective love and passion, and a torturing doubt.

At that very moment the door opened, and Bertram Traymore walked into the room.

Chapter XXVII *An Insidious Attack*

"A NICE fright you've given us all, young lady!" Traymore—the essence of debonair dandyism, a pink carnation in the buttonhole of his smart grey flannel suit—stepped up to the little hospital cot with all the ease and assurance of a visiting doctor.

"W-what brings you here?" stammered the invalid, eyes wide with astonishment not unmixed with chagrin. It was the very irony of fate that Traymore, of all people most unwanted at this crisis between herself and Peter, should sail into the room as though he *owned* the place and its occupant!

"A foolish question! You already know the

answer, or "– with a laugh, and a sudden brusque nod towards Armstrong, as though not till that very moment had Traymore seen the man "if you don't, you ought to, oughtn't you?"

A tidal wave of red had flown to Prudence's cheeks. She was not strong enough, not sufficiently mistress of herself as yet, to cope with this insidious attack.

And the awful part was that a quite wrong impression was being conveyed to Peter . . . and her brain wouldn't act quick enough to set it right.

Traymore had come right up to the bedside, and with a professional manner that at any other time and in any other circumstances might have been amusing, lifted her right wrist and held her pulse between his fingers.

"Far too rapid! I say, nurse" this to the intensely interested young person who now opened the door and dubiously regarded her flushed patient— "I say, nurse, after all this young lady's been through, ought she to be allowed to have a crowd of visitors?"

Peter rose at once. He was furious with Traymore, but the fellow was too much of a puppy to waste anger on. And for Prudence's sake, he wouldn't let his temper master him.

The nurse laughed merrily at Traymore's protest.

"Meaning that two's company, but three's a crowd?" She cast a look at the tall, stalwart fellow whom hitherto she had considered the invalid's 'young man.' Was there a rivalry between him and this slim, dandified new-comer? Personally, she'd prefer the first one, but there was no accounting for girls' tastes.

"I'm going," said Peter briefly. "I quite agree

that Miss Page has had enough excitement, and should rest."

Bert Traymore turned, still holding Prudence's wrist, and gave an amused laugh which yet contrived to have more than a touch of insolence about it.

"That's cool!" Then, to Prudence:

"You don't want ME to run away the moment I've come all the way to town to see you, my dear?"

The tone was so possessive, so assured, that to the whole company it seemed to say:

"A man surely has a right to five minutes alone with his future wife."

Peter and the nurse went off, the latter assuring Traymore that he might only stay a short time.

"Infernal cheek!" The moment the door had closed behind the others, Traymore sat down close to Prudence, not relinquishing her hand, but trying to draw her nearer to him. "Oh, I say, don't be so standoffish! What's come over you? Shy, eh?"

"I—I hate when you you—get familiar," the girl blurted out nervously.

"Get familiar? What d'you mean? You used to be keen enough for me to kiss you. But I'd forgot for the moment"—his voice changed from sharpness to a suave slinkiness that was equally distasteful to his hearer—"that you're not yourself, my dear! What a jolly narrow squeak you had, if what the papers say is true!"

This *dénouement*, and the memory of the fire was too much for the invalid's equanimity, sorely disturbed as the arrival of this man had made it. She dragged her hand from Traymore, broke down, and wept.

"Oh, I say, stop it, like a darling! I'm a blundering fool! Here, lean on me——"

"No, go away! I—I don't want ever to see you again. You—you've only brought t-trouble—into my life——"

"Come, come!" Traymore put an arm about her shaking shoulders, bending his face down to hers, which was hidden in her hands. He drew her hands away, mopping up the tears with his silk handkerchief.

Prudence was too weak for further protest. Indeed, everything in the little ward seemed vague and misty. Her head swam, and her vision was a blur.

In the midst of the queer fog that had come over her, was it her sick fancy, or did she see the door open, and behind the nurse glimpse Peter Armstrong's face and see it change from solicitude and love to a bewildered look of pain?

"We'll give the lovers another five minutes, bless their happy hearts!" announced the trim young nurse as she gently closed the ward door behind herself and Peter Armstrong, and led the way along the corridor to the top of the staircase.

Peter did not speak. He could not, at that moment. The perfidy of Prudence had struck him like a death-blow.

She, who had answered his kiss with lover-like response, had yielded to the embraces of another!

"They're engaged, you know," went on the nurse. "Sister's just told me. It seems he saw her when he arrived here, and explained how the land lay. I—now wasn't it funny?—I thought *you* were her fiancé, at the first?"

Peter didn't think it in the least bit funny. He was white to the very lips, if the chattering young woman by his side had been sufficiently observant to notice that.

She led the way downstairs.

"You can go in the waiting-room, if you like." Indeed, she wasn't at all adverse to keeping him company, there.

"No, thanks, I shan't stay." He wanted to leave the place at once. He dare not trust himself to another encounter with Bert Traymore.

At that very moment, however, an elegantly attired young lady appeared in the doorway of the waiting-room, and hailed Peter by name.

It was Virginia Dale!

Peter was ready to confound the girl, who always seemed to bob up when one was least expecting her, and when certainly one least *wished* to see her.

"Oh, Peter, I must talk to you for a moment! How very lucky that we've met!" She darted out into the carbolic-smelling corridor, and ignoring the nurse who felt she had been unjustly done out of a promising flirtation with a most attractive man drew Peter into the waiting-room, closing the door behind her cautiously.

"How on earth did you find your way here?" counter-thrust Peter ungraciously. He leant against the bare wood table of the waiting-room, and stared in dumb misery at Virginia.

But—lovely as she was—he scarcely saw her. In her place was a slim, young, boyish-headed vision in a cot upstairs, with dark eyes all aglow with love and longing.

Love?

She had made a travesty of the word! Those eyes had *lied* to him. . . .

Even at this moment, she was gazing into the eyes of Traymore with that selfsame look. . . .

"I was coming up to town, as things had got too awkward at the Towers," Virginia was saying plaintively, and with an insinuation which at first he did not catch, though later, to his undoing, it was to become painfully familiar. "Bert offered to come with me, and we stopped for a moment at the post office, so that I might send a telegram to a woman I know in town, who'll put me up for a day or so, until"—here Virginia looked challengingly at Peter—"until things blow over."

Peter didn't take up the challenge.

Virginia went on:

"You know how gossipy these little country post offices always are? Well, it seems a telegram had just come through to the Page family, from this hospital, saying where Prudence was. The woman in charge couldn't resist reading it to us, and as we were going up to town anyhow, and the train was due in about five minutes, Bert was mighty glad to get the news, of course."

Peter raised his head.

"Why 'of course'?" He had a terrible premonition what the answer might be, and the premonition was quite justified when Virginia, in a cleverly casual tone, replied:

"Well, they're engaged, aren't they? Isn't it natural he should be anxious?"

Peter didn't speak, and she went on carelessly:

"I think Bert has shown up rather well in a difficult position. The little affair at the Towers might have put

him off—oh, you know what I mean—don't look so stern, Peter dear! —I'm not hinting for a moment that she took the jewels and the money, for I'm sure she didn't. But you know that Bert's type . . . indeed that most of us"—here she sobered up, and sighed—"most of us are slaves to public opinion, aren't we?"

"I must be going," said Peter brusquely. He couldn't stand this sort of talk another moment. Had she called him into this room merely 'to rub it in' more painfully?

"But you mustn't go. I haven't come to the important bit yet." Virginia was concerned and supplicant.

"Well . . ." With unflattering haste, Peter drew out his watch.

The girl put a hand upon his arm.

"It's so difficult to tell you. You—you must help me out, Peter."

"I don't understand. Won't you say what you have to say, and let me get away?"

Virginia blinked her beautifully made-up eyes, hoping a gleam of tears might show and soften the hard heart.

"I'm in a ghastly predicament, Peter. It isn't your fault and it isn't my fault, except that I wanted to help that poor Prudence in her trouble . . . and by doing so, I got myself into a worse trouble than hers . . . far worse . . . because, after all, one's reputation is the only thing in the world that *really* matters to a girl . . . you understand . . . oh help me out, Peter! I can't say it!"—and with consummate art Virginia forced big tears to her eyes and let them trickle over the long, darkened lashes like two pearls of sorrow.

"Good heavens! Speak out!"

"It's my good name, Peter!" Virginia cast decorum to the winds, slipping her hand up to his shoulder, and tilting her face towards his. "Oh Peter, you won't cast me off? You'll save my reputation, won't you? Promise you will!"

"But what have I done?" The amazed young man looked down on the lovely, pleading face.

"You—we——" Virginia swallowed hard, as though choking over her unmaidenly predicament. "We spent the night—practically the whole of it—under your roof——"

"Great guns!" ejaculated Peter. "You mean the gossips are talking? Is that it? But I couldn't turn you out into the storm, to drown, or be killed by lightning, or a fallen tree, could I? What else would you have had me do?"

With imploring eyes and trembling lips she blurted out:

"There's only *one* thing will save my good name, Peter. It's a hard, suspicious world, and *cruel* to us women——"

"What's the 'one thing'?" he demanded.

"That you tell the world that you and I are going to be married!" was the bomb she flung at him

Chapter XXVIII *Astounding News*

PRUDENCE'S father arrived at the hospital that evening, and the following morning took his daughter home.

Her nerves had been so shaken by the fire, and what preceded it, that she could put up no further fight, but quietly acquiesced in the arrangements.

What else was there for her to do?

Besides, although her father was rather reticent on the subject, her mother wasn't well, and wouldn't be better until the truant child came home.

"We need you, Prudence," said John Page, and for the first time the girl noticed how tired his eyes looked, and how seamed with lines was his rugged, simple face.

"After what happened at Mrs. Vansittart's, I feel as if I could never hold my head up again," breathed Prudence.

Her father patted her hand. They were in the train that was carrying them every moment nearer Green Gables, and the girl felt her courage ebbing.

"Your own conscience tells you that is wrong. You must face things out, my child. You must live them down, even if the real culprit isn't found."

Ah! that was cold comfort. A difficult philosophy.

Outside the windows, the meadowland was rushing by, the gorse one glorious blaze of yellow in the hollows. Here and there, among the hedges, the first dog-roses were blushing warmly on their sprays, and soon the honeysuckle would be filling the air with perfume.

Along the railway banks the yellow archangels and wild geraniums were in bloom, and long sprays of ground ivy. Foxgloves were steadily growing taller, soon to replace with purple the pretty blue of the hyacinth.

Despite her agitation, Prudence noticed all these things, lover of nature as she was.

And the beauty and the freshness of the countryside brought Peter and his love more keenly home to her.

She *loved* Peter Armstrong. Not even the painful-

ness of her present situation . . . returning to her home under a cloud . . . could really dim the joy that sang in her young heart like a trilling bird of spring.

Peter loved the country, too. Maybe to-night he'd come and see her, and together they would ramble through the beech-woods where the ferns uncurled their delicate fronds, and pause by the pool of water-lilies where the big, glossy leaves lay so thickly on the surface that they almost formed a mat.

That was a carpet for the dragon-flies, and for the dainty feet of the saucy little wagtail.

Peter! Such a strong, simple name . . . a name to *lean on*!

How wonderful to be given the privilege of devoting her whole life, just to make him happy!

He would ask her, wouldn't he? That glad time was surely coming. . . .

The wheels of the train beat a reassuring melody.

Her mother would approve, too. Mother always had liked Peter Armstrong, in the same measure that she disliked Bert Traymore.

"How blind I was before!" thought Prudence Page.

She *must* see Peter to-night, and explain to him that awkward scene with Traymore. The latter had taken advantage of her weakness to stage a stupid little tableau that to Peter must have looked exactly like a love-scene. . . .

When Prudence and her father reached the end of the train journey, a lad who worked about Green Gables met them with a dog-cart, and away they drove.

And when the old house came in view, and they stopped at the bottom of the old flagged walk, Prudence saw it all through a mist of tears, and darted up the

path and into her mother's arms like a homing pigeon.

"My darling!"

"Mother! I—I've missed you so!"

There was so much to say, to explain. The girl poured into the ears that had never failed her, all the story of her flight.

Her mother, who was still weak from her brief spell of illness, trembled over the story of the fire.

"They tried to keep the newspaper away from me, but I found it, just the same. My darling, what an escape!"

Prudence flushed and her lips parted with a tremulous happiness as she told of Peter Armstrong's visit to the hospital.

"He was so kind . . . so strong . . . so gentle. . ."

The mother's eyes softened.

"And he'd never, never believe that wicked libel about the money they dared to accuse you of taking. *You*, my baby . . . of all people. . . !" A world of protective love was in the mother's voice as she kissed her daughter.

"Oh no. He wouldn't."

"And you say that Mr. Traymore came also?"

"Yes. I don't know why."

"To make trouble, I'll be bound." An anxious light glimmered for a moment in Mrs. Page's eyes. Then it cleared away. "But Mr. Armstrong isn't the man to be put off by others' scheming. He knows you're home to-day, does he?"

Prudence nodded.

"I wrote a line before I left, asking him to call to-night. He'll come. I'm sure he will."

She smiled a smile of uttermost belief in this superman who had come into her life at the very time she

most needed a strong tower to lean upon . . . little guessing the queer turn of fate in store for both of them.

A soft night, the moon high in a deep blue sky, and the nightingale trilling a song of ecstasy!

Prudence, who had awaited Peter's coming for two hours, had not abandoned hope.

Something—she knew not what—had detained the man she loved.

But he would come. Of course he would.

In the wide, low-ceiled room upstairs that was her own especial sanctum, she sat curled up on the shallow window-seat and leant out into the perfumed night.

The honeysuckle round the leaded panes had newly bloomed, and Prudence broke a spray off, and fastened it in the quaint blue gown that she was wearing.

With her short, curling hair a halo round her head, she looked like the illustration of a fairy-story too lovely to be real.

So thought some one who approached the garden-gate at that moment, and saw the phantom vision at the upstairs window.

"Poor child! I haven't the heart to meet her! Seems a shame that such a pretty creature shouldn't have more out of life, and that all the troubles aren't confined to us homely, unattractive women, who by rights oughtn't to expect too much of men!"

This odd bit of philosophy rose to the heart of Janet Mercer as she hesitated for a moment underneath the lilac-tree beside the garden gate.

Her love-affair with Will Ogilvie was running with remarkable smoothness, these days. They hadn't even

had a tiff. Even his selfish old mother had stilled her tongue, and however temporary such a state of affairs might prove to be, it was entirely satisfactory.

"Who is it?" Prudence's fresh young voice, vibrant with expectation, cut into Janet's thoughts.

So the child was expecting some one, was she? Peter Armstrong?

Janet hoped—knowing what she did know—that it wasn't he.

But it must be Peter, because Prudence's only other man-friend (save the word!) was—or had been—that Traymore fellow, and, thank heaven! *that* affair was definitely 'off.'

"Hello, there! It's only me, Janet Mercer." The woman moved out into the radius of the moon, clicking open the garden-gate, and coming swiftly up the path.

Prudence's heart contracted with the pain of disappointment. But immediately, she was ashamed of not being more pleased at seeing Janet, her staunch friend.

She slid off the window-seat and went at once downstairs, to the brightly-lit parlour where her mother sat sewing, and her father was nodding over his newspaper.

The two young women greeted each other warmly, though in Janet's manner was a certain odd constraint.

It didn't arise from the story of the theft at Wyndham Towers, nor from Prudence's flight to town, and her adventures there. Janet was *afraid* for Prudence's young heart. . . .

They talked about the fire.

"The Smiths oughtn't to have left the building. They're paid to be the caretakers and had no right to go away," vouchsafed Janet.

"I hope it won't cost them their job," commented Mrs. Page, glancing up from her sewing for the hundredth time to gaze lovingly at Prudence.

"Oh, they won't mind *that*. They were sick and tired of it. And besides, there can't be any more job when the building's gone!" Janet's eyes lighted on Prudence's bobbed head. "Such a shorn lamb! But it's becoming, Prudence!"

The young girl smiled wistfully.

Why wasn't Peter coming?

Something had detained him.

She screwed up her courage to try and bring his name into the conversation. Maybe Janet had seen him?

But Janet's manner was a little queer, to-night. Sort of nervous, wasn't it?

Then, in a lull of talk, Prudence blurted out:

"Does—does Mr. Armstrong still come up and talk to little Lucia?"

Janet's lips tightened oddly.

"No. Not so much." And then she added: "He's been rather taken up of late."

Of course that meant but one thing, WORK.

But why did Prudence's heart throb painfully, and her breath catch in her throat, as though with a strange, unbearable premonition? . . .

John Page got up to go to bed. He had a hard day before him on the morrow, so he said, and excused himself, leaving the women to their gossip.

The moment he had gone, his wife remarked, in a would-be casual tone that didn't deceive Janet in the least:

"He's a very clever man, is Peter Armstrong, and one that I've a great admiration for."

Then Janet said a most extraordinary thing.

" Oh, I wouldn't let your admiration run away with you. Peter Armstrong's like all the men, where a pretty woman is concerned. I've not much patience with him."

Prudence felt her whole body grow rigid.

" W—why ? " (Was it her own voice that spoke ?)

" He's let himself be hooked by that Virginia Dale, and by the way he's going on, he's *hers*, and crazy over her ! "

Peter . . . ' crazy over ' Virginia Dale ? *Hers* ?

Impossible !

Prudence sat in stunned silence, staring at Janet as though the bringer of bad tidings were a terrifying ghost.

Janet's lips were pressed into a tight, disapproving line. She had no certain knowledge that Prudence's heart was seriously involved with the young inventor, but she did know that he had given balm to that young, loving, bruised heart when Traymore had so hurt it, in the past.

And Prudence was of the type that must cling to something, must lean on someone . . . and Janet had always looked on Peter Armstrong as the proverbial oak.

What cads men were !

Judging by the white face of the young girl sitting opposite, he *had* trifled with her !

It was Mrs. Page who broke the sudden silence. There was a sharp note of strain as she said, quickly :

" But he went to visit Prudence at the hospital only yesterday. He—he was most attentive——"

" And Virginia Dale was waiting for him downstairs

all the time. Oh! the ways of men are beyond me! I give them up!"

Prudence found her tongue. It was parched, and the words came with difficulty, but she got them out.

"She must have followed him to the hospital. I don't understand."

Janet flung out her capable hands with a sarcastic gesture.

"Oh, *I* understand, only too well. He's like all the rest of them . . . keen on a chase . . . though I always did think in the past that it was Virginia did most of the hunting. Of course, she's been wild about him for a long time, and he didn't seem to see it. But even the best of them are susceptible to flattery, and she's clever, in her way. She's played her cards well, and she's *got* him."

Janet took a breather, then went on:

"They came down from London yesterday on the 5.15, getting to the Towers in time for dinner. I heard Miss Virginia saying that he'd taken her to the Savoy for tea, and they'd had a long heart-to-heart talk (bah! *she* hasn't got a heart, I'll wager!), and they'd 'fixed things up,' and she was 'divinely happy' (you know how she gushes, don't you?), and Mrs. Vansittart gave her a long, queer look, and then kissed her and said: 'You're luckier than you deserve, my dear,' and Miss Virginia she only laughs and tosses her head, and boasted over her power with men. Mr. Armstrong didn't hear that bit, of course, but he dined at the Towers and sat next Virginia, and she carried on with him something awful, as though they were already on the honeymoon, and all, and though sometimes he looked a bit fed up, for indeed she was overdoing the whole thing shockingly, he stood it, and with my own

eyes—for I was crossing the back of the hall, where it's in shadow, and they didn't see me—I saw Virginia fling her arms round his neck and kiss him 'good night' and all. It made me sick!"

Prudence fought against the dizziness that enveloped her, summoning every particle of pride to her aid.

But she daren't trust her voice to speak, and—hypnotized and at the same time tortured—could only listen dumbly to Janet rambling on.

"He was back again to-night at dinner, sitting by her side. And, would you believe it? already she was trying to make him jealous by leading on that Traymore fellow, flirting with him to beat the band! Not that Mr. Armstrong seemed to notice it . . . but, then, he's too much of a gentleman!"

"And they do say that the night of the storm he was entertaining her till all hours in his cottage. I'm surprised at him for *that*, but I dare say she was stormbound, and no doubt she had an end in view. Not that he doesn't seem fond enough of her. . . ."

Seeing Prudence's face, Janet at last desisted, blaming herself for a garrulous and tactless fool.

She rose to go.

"Don't you worry, dear, about that unpleasant business at the Towers . . . the stolen money, I mean . . . Mrs. Vansittart spoke to me about it, and I told her you were as innocent as the babe unborn. She's coming to see you, when you're strong enough——"

"No. Oh, no. Tell her not to." Prudence couldn't bear any more. Then, pulling herself together:

"I'll walk down to the garden gate with you, Janet."

She needed *air*. The house was stifling her.

So Janet went away, and Prudence was left with the

moonlight and the maddening scent of honeysuckle and the passionate love-song of the nightingale . . . left to think of the ruin of her life . . . her loneliness . . . and the perfidy of the one man she'd trusted out of all the disappointing world.

Chapter XXIX • *Farewell to Love*

OPENING the garden-gate—for indeed Prudence couldn't bear to return immediately to her mother's loving, all-seeing eyes—she went out to the road, rambling along by a little stream whose bubbling tinkle made another night-song in her ears.

Stay! There were footsteps on the road! She hesitated, heart a-throb again. Was Peter, at the eleventh hour, coming . . . to explain?

The moon was high and clear now, and she saw him coming towards her.

"Peter!" The word was out of her mouth before she realized it.

"Is that you, Prudence?" His voice was low and constrained.

"Yes . . . I—I thought . . . you weren't coming. Did you . . . did you get my note?"

He was beside her now, looking at her with dark and deeply troubled eyes, as she stood on the edge of the tiny stream that babbled by the road-side.

"Yes, I got your letter. I couldn't come to-night . . . till now . . ."

Something in his tone brought the agony of fear back. He went on:

"Prudence, I've come . . . to apologize . . . for

yesterday. I had no right to—to—do as I did. . . ."

"You mean, you had no right to . . . kiss me?" Her very heart stood still, awaiting his reply.

"Just that." He bowed his head. "I apologize. I'm sorry. I know I—I meant nothing to you—but it was an unwarrantable liberty, just the same. Will you forgive me . . . and forget?"

Forgive? Forget? The words were like a death-knell!

"And there's something else I have to tell you," he went on, staring straight ahead of him, and speaking in a queer monotonous tone as though he had a lesson he must say, and be done with it for ever. "I wanted you to hear it direct from me . . . before anyone else told you . . . it isn't formally announced yet. . . ."

Prudence steadied herself for the blow. It came.

"Virginia Dale and I . . . we are engaged . . ." said Peter slowly, staring past Prudence into the moonlit night.

Virginia Dale and Peter . . . *engaged*!

Not from any other lips but Peter's own could Prudence have believed the news!

Peter . . . the one man in all the world who was a tower of strength, a rock to lean upon . . . the man to whom she'd given the whole love of her fervent young heart . . . Peter . . . to marry the girl who *hated* her . . . a girl who wasn't worthy to unlatch his shoe-strings!

The blow was so terrific that for one dizzy moment she was stunned and speechless.

"I wanted to tell you first," Peter was repeating in a low voice, standing by the edge of the little tinkling stream that ran along the roadside.

In vain she tried to find her voice.

The ' correct ' thing was to congratulate him, wasn't it ?

How *could* she ?

Peter ! She loved him . . . ardently. Always she would love him, until breath left her body.

Pale moths darted across the path and over the running brook, and larger moths passed with a low hum of wings. The scent of honeysuckle drenched the night air with loveliness, and the whiteness of bramble blossom was like a lamp in the dark.

But oh ! what *pain* this beauty brought !

Beauty . . . without the love of Peter Armstrong !

How could she face the endless train of nights like these, knowing she'd missed the *one* great thing that changed existence from prosaic round of humdrum tasks and so-called pleasures, to a pulsating joy that poets sang about, and people died for ?

Love !

Farewell to Love !

Peter stood there in the moonlight, his clean-cut, handsome face as though carved from ivory, his strong square chin more prominent than ever, his fine lips set, as though a battle must be fought.

Prudence never realized how much she tempted him at that moment . . . how he longed to cast all wisdom to the winds and kneel down on the dusty road, right at her feet, and tell her that no matter what honour demanded of him, he loved *her*, and her alone . . . would always love her, till the moon and stars faded, and the earth crumbled into dust.

But before him and between them was the tear-wet, supplicant face of the girl whom—all unwittingly —he'd ' compromised.'

Virginia had played her part well, and had won. An inglorious victory, it's true, but——

"If he isn't head over ears in love with me now, he soon will be," that self-confident damsel had confided to her hostess, with a complacent little smile—which seemed to say: "Few men can resist ME—for long!"

Mrs. Vansittart had thrown her weight in on Virginia's side.

"The whole countryside is talking about how this silly girl spent practically the whole night in your cottage. You can't outrage Mrs. Grundy and get away with it, you know. Unfortunately, it's always the woman who pays."

Peter had listened with a set face and a despairing heart. He was chivalrous to a degree—quixotically so, as nice men very often are—and his way seemed plain before him. He had compromised the girl, and he must make amends, even though his happiness were wrecked thereby.

Had he known that Prudence loved him, and had Traymore failed to stage that little drama at the hospital, giving the very definite impression that Prudence was *his* girl, it is very doubtful if Peter would have had the strength to link his own name further with Virginia's in a formally announced 'engagement.'

But fate had worked hard for Virginia, skilfully aided by herself.

Peter had seen Traymore with his arm round Prudence, and what made matters worse was that, but a few minutes before, Peter himself had held her in his own strong arms, and Prudence had yielded as a girl—unless she be the veriest coquette—can only yield when *love* has come to her.

She had tacitly admitted Traymore to be her sweetheart, after responding to another man's embrace. That meant she was a heartless flirt.

But as he stood there in the moonlight, taking farewell of her, all thoughts of rancour and bitterness fled from Peter's mind. He could only see the beauty and the sweetness of her, and painfully, agonizingly, force himself to believe it wasn't meant for him, and never would be his.

Prudence found her voice at last.

"I—I ought to—to congratulate you—oughtn't I?"

How queer the banal words sounded! How cold and formal!

He cleared his throat.

"That's—kind—of you."

Kind?

She could have laughed hysterically at the using of the word.

But all she said was:

"I hope you will be very happy." (Yes, the words came easier now, although it seemed as if some other girl were speaking.)

"Happy? Is anybody happy?" Peter stared moodily across the little stream to the woods where a nightingale, as though in mockery of his misery, had started to trill out a throbbing love song.

Then, stooping down, he plucked a spray of honeysuckle growing by the roadside, hardly conscious what he did, except that to look into the face of the girl he loved was something that he couldn't compass without breaking down entirely.

A will-o'-the-wisp flew over the hedge, and as the man saw it, his lips curved into a bitter smile.

"That's happiness for you . . . a will-o'-the-wisp!" said he, nodding towards the glittering point of light. He made a swift move as though to capture it, but it was gone! "Symbolical, isn't it? Reach out and try to catch it, and"—here Prudence saw that the tiny, glowing insect was again circling round the hedge, but always out of reach—"it mocks you for a fool!"

Was this the speech of a man in love? thought she, a queer hope springing up.

But his next words dashed that hope to atoms, putting her outside the pale of Peter's life.

"I hope that you will be happy with Bert Traymore."

A hot contradiction rose to her lips, but pride held it back.

Happy with Bert Traymore?

Peter thought he could dispose of her as easily as that!

A recollection of the long, enchanted kiss . . . a kiss of love . . . love on *her* side, but not on his! . . . rose up to goad her pride to silence.

He thought her *that* sort of a girl, did he? To go straight from his kiss to a lover's arms?

Well, let him think it!

Let him go to Virginia Dale, shallow and vain and insincere, and try and find this elusive happiness he craved! *Virginia* was the will-o'-the-wisp he wanted . . . how stupid not to have understood his metaphor!

So Prudence, her heart hot with outraged pride and indignation, held her peace when Peter wished her happiness.

"I must be going in. It's late." She held her hand out towards him.

Either he didn't see it, or deliberately ignored it.

"What a night for . . . lovers!"

(Did he *mean* to torture her?)

Her dry lips uttered:

"Then you ought to be away from here."

He took no notice of the innuendo. He had lifted the spray of honeysuckle to his lips, and was drawing it gently across them, as though he loved the feel of it.

"Such a fitful fever life is!" He looked down at the tinkling stream that babbled by the roadside. "Seeking . . . questing passionately . . . and never finding! Oh, to be at peace!"

In the woods the nightingale was singing madly. That song of love was like a knife in Prudence's heart.

"What's the good of it all?" he went on, as though talking to himself alone. "What's the good of all the striving, and the work, and fret? Where does it lead us? To the green, Elysian fields where we shall find that mystic happiness we crave? . . . Ah, no! never in this disappointing world! . . . never until we get the long, long rest. . . ."

Prudence felt the hot tears welling in her eyes, and turned her head aside, for there was something strangely disquieting in hearing these intimate things from a man's lips.

"Beauty . . . born to trouble the hearts of men!" he was muttering now, as though unaware of her presence. Then, lifting his face that was like fine ivory in the clear, pale light, and gazing into the deep blue heavens: "'Oh, moon of my desire that knows no wane!'"

Prudence found her voice. It came, soft and low, like a woodland breeze.

"Why are you so unhappy, when you . . . love?" Despite her own pain, she could pity him, who loved —and so evidently was tortured by—a girl like Virginia Dale.

He turned on her almost harshly.

"Don't you realize that women smash every temple that a man sets up?"

Her breath caught in her throat, but she contrived to murmur:

"Not all women. There are many fine ones, true ones, who would reverence . . . a man's shrine . . . instead of trying to throw it down. . . ."

He gave a low, bitter laugh.

"I haven't met one yet." His eyes, moody and despondent, rested for a moment on her, and the bitterness in them cut her like a knife. "Boys' dreams are the best dreams . . . the unattainable princess, the lovely lady one will one day meet . . . and then one grows to man's estate, and finds romance is just a bubble . . . so one wakes!"

Silence between them, broken only by the nightingale's ecstatic song.

Then Peter gruffly added:

"Ever read old Omar Khayyam? He's a 'temple-smasher,' if you like! When I was a boy, I *hated* him and his philosophy! Crazy idealist I was! But now"—he flung a hand out with a gesture of abandon—"now I'm not sure old Omar isn't right! Live in the present with every fibre of your being . . . take what the gods offer you . . . and to blazes with ideals! As some old blighter wisely wrote: 'Carpe diem quam minimum credula postero.' My Latin's rocky, but it means that one should 'seize to-day and think not of the morrow.'"

Prudence drew back, startled. Was her hero stepping from his pedestal? What was this new, disturbing creed of which he spoke? What could she say, what do, to take that bitterness away?

But all at once, his mood changed. He smiled rather wistfully in the pale moonlight.

"Even old Omar had his better moments. I recollect a verse that breaks one's heart with its yearning for lost ideals:

> "'Ah, Love! could you and I with Fate conspire
> To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
> Would we not shatter it to bits, and then
> Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire?'"

The speaker's voice caught on a sharp intake of breath as suddenly he took Prudence's hand in his, raised it as though to kiss it, and then as suddenly almost flung it from him, turning abruptly and swinging away at a rapid pace down the long, moonlit road until a bend hid him from the girl's blurred gaze.

She stooped and fumbled in the dust for something. At last she found it, pressing it, dust and all, against her lips. It was only a crushed spray of honeysuckle, filling the air with heavenly sweetness . . . but his lips had rested there!

Chapter XXX *What Annette Told*

VIRGINIA DALE, before the mirror in her bedroom at the Towers, was busily engaged in peeling from her face a green, adhesive mask of 'complexion clay.'

Virginia was strangely happy. She had two strings

to her bow, now, and one of them extremely 'worthwhile,' too. That she was in love with Peter Armstrong, she didn't for a moment doubt.

And Bert Traymore's infatuation for her showed no signs of diminishing. He'd been awfully sporting in the way he'd 'butted in' between Peter and the Page chit, that memorable day in the hospital.

It was all the more commendable in that he didn't really care a scrap for Prudence. He'd told Virginia, repeatedly, that Prudence was the last creature in the world he would desire to marry.

"I can't stick these bread-and-butter misses. She's the world's prize-bore," he graciously observed to Jinny, sure that his words would have a welcome here. "And if Armstrong weren't as dull as ditch-water himself, he wouldn't look at her."

Virginia pretended to heartily concur in the latter sentiment. Her 'cue was to make Bert think she didn't care a jot for Peter, but had only engaged herself to him (temporarily) for the purpose of extracting money from him.

"My scheme is—having brought about a definite engagement, and had it publicly announced, to make myself thoroughly obnoxious to the man! You know what a little *beast* I can be, when I want to, Bert?"

Bert nodded rather dubiously. Jinny was too cute, altogether, and he couldn't entirely trust her and her schemes. She *had* seemed mighty keen on the Armstrong fellow, despite all she said to the contrary.

"And then——? What next?"

"Oh, men aren't angels of forbearance," she cried lightly. "Peter'll break it off. Then—you mark my words!—there'll be merry hell to pay, and all!"

Bert had given a grudging laugh of admiration. How clever Jinny was! What nerve!

"Don't be too sure he'll break it off. Even though you have a devil in you sometimes, you're a beauty any man would be proud of, Jinny!"

("Dear old simpleton!" thought she, amused.)

Aloud she said, with a shrug of her slim shoulders:

"Oh, much dropping of water wears away a stone. And Peter isn't as crazy over me as you think. A clever woman, be she as lovely as Venus, can soon make a man loathe her, if she wants to. And then poor old Peter'll have to stump up the 'consolation money.' I should think three thousand pounds would be the right amount of balm for my broken heart, ha! ha!"

"Three thousand pounds?" Bert's near-set eyes stared at her in amazement. "That's a sweet sum!"

"Oh, I happen to know that Peter's last invention has brought him heaps of coin," rejoined Virginia airily. "I've got in touch with the firm in town that handles it. It's selling to beat the band."

"And you think the judge will award you that amount of money?" Bert looked incredulous.

"Uh-ha!" She nodded her blonde head. "Trust me for making eyes at him, and getting on his soft side!"

Bert was meditative for a moment. Then he sagely observed:

"I wouldn't bank on that. Awfully pretty women seem to be getting frightfully snubbed in the Courts, these days. Vamping's out of date. Just take a glance at the papers——"

But Jinny wasn't listening. How could the sub-

ject really interest her, when at heart she hadn't the slightest intention of letting Peter go? No, not even for ten thousand pounds! She *wanted* him!

Meantime, Bert was useful for the furtherance of her plans.

Now, as she unpeeled the green clay mask from off her face, and leisurely dabbed on cold cream to ease the smarting, her thoughts were pleasurable ones.

Peter Armstrong was a rising man. He would be very rich, one day.

How she would love to spend his money!

He was well-born, too. Jinny was a little snob at heart, a veritable social-climber. She was glad that Peter's 'connections' were of the very best.

And he was handsome, too. She'd superintend his wardrobe, and make him go to the best tailor in London, and order half a dozen suits, in lieu of the shabby garments he so often chose to wear. Nothing like having a well-tailored husband to drag round to social functions!

How she would brag about his brains, too!

"My husband, the famous inventor . . ."

A town house she'd have. Better start now and study up on interior decoration.

And an up-river bungalow, for week-ends, with a punt, and green lawns sloping trimly to the water's edge. Gave one quite a 'cachet,' to have a little week-end place!

She'd travel, too. Oh, rather! Of course, Peter couldn't always come with her, but then it was rather fashionable for a young married woman to roam about alone. . . . Not that a pretty woman ever *was* alone! Good gracious, no! *That* was an exploded fallacy.

Jinny began to see herself in Switzerland at the winter sports, with a retinue of gay young men teaching her how to 'luge' and 'ski' and skate . . . forming queues of partners for her at the evening dances!

She visualized herself on board ship, the centre of an admiring throng!

Or at the best hotel in Cairo, setting off on camel-back for a moonlight glimpse of the world's great mystery, the Sphinx!

Or on the beach at Honolulu, with the crooning of the waters of the South Pacific all about her, and a handsome youth at her feet, singing a love song to the intriguing music of his ukelele! Gently, sweetly, she would check the flood of his spoken adoration.

"No . . . it cannot be . . . I love *my husband*! We have met *too late*!"

"The witch-hazel, madam." Annette, her clever maid, interrupted Miss Virginia's day-dreams by plumping a bottle of astringent on the dressing-table.

"Where've you been, Annette? You're never at hand when I want you," said her mistress, irritably, annoyed at the brusqueness of the interruption. "I don't want the witch-hazel just now. I want a face-massage."

"Yes, madam," replied the maid respectfully. "I'll give you one at once. Your face does look tired."

Virginia whirled round on her angrily.

"Nonsense, girl! Whatever do you mean? I haven't looked as well in ages!"

Love was a beautifier, wasn't it?

Or were the years *really* telling?

She wheeled back to the glass again, examining herself carefully. What nonsense of Annette to talk that way!

Nevertheless, she submitted to the operation, and leant back in a low chair, head pillowed on a cushion, scarf round her hair, while the maid placed a towel wrung out of hot water on her face

Luxury! Jinny luxuriated in the relaxing warmth.

Then Annette's nimble fingers pinched and squeezed and kneaded the youth into her cheeks again.

"You've got an uncommonly dry skin, madam. If you didn't do this every day, you'd soon be wrinkled."

Virginia repressed a shudder.

Wrinkled?

"My second last young lady in Los Angeles only had a massage twice a week. But then, if you'll excuse my saying so, she was some years younger . . ."

(Oh, confound the maid's impertinence! Whatever had taken the creature to-day!)

"She was about the age of that pretty Miss Page who lives at Green Gables," pursued Annette, ceasing the slapping process, and spraying her mistress' face with the astringent lotion. "But if you ask *me*, I should say Miss Page has it all over her for looks!"

Virginia glared in wrath at the tormentor, but Annette won an unfair point in the game by squirting some of the lotion in her mistress' eyes, which automatically closed until the spraying process ended.

"What interest have you in Miss Page?" queried Virginia sharply. (There was something at the bottom of all this. She knew Annette!)

"Oh, none at all, madam." The woman was all respectful courtesy. "I hope I know my place.

And of course you're the last person—begging your pardon if I'm making too bold, but you've the right to hear it—you're the last person to know what's going on."

Virginia sat up smartly in her chair.

"Speak out, you fool! What d'you mean?" She gripped the woman's arm.

"Ow! Ouch!" Annette's natural venom towards a mistress who was too exacting, and invariably inconsiderate of her servant's comfort, got the better of her. "I'll thank you not to call me names, and tear the flesh off my arm, even if I'm only a maid, and not looked on as a human creature!"

That unexpected onslaught checked Virginia's rising wrath, for Annette was much too useful to antagonize.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you, but you shouldn't annoy me by hinting so at things," said Virginia ungraciously. "Now tell me what you mean."

Annette, however, wasn't to be deprived of 'getting a little of her own back.' She'd been baited often enough in this God-forsaken hole—(to her the English countryside was dreariness beyond belief)—not to enjoy retaliation.

And Mr. Armstrong was a real gentleman, bless him! If she—the snubbed, overworked Annette—could 'put between' him and this domineering lady (save the mark!), why! she just *would*, and good luck to him!

And so she sniffed, and hummed and hawed, and then said, cryptically:

"'Tisn't my business, madam, and I'm not one to make mischief, but if I'd a young man of my own . . . and not likely to, in these parts, being as how

I can't bear country yokels and Reubens, but like the city chaps the best, with some life and go to them! . . . if I'd a young man of my own I'd keep an eye on him, I would, and not let him go stravaiging the roads in the moonlight when the nightingale's singing fit to bust his stumnick, and it's courting-time, and all, and a pretty young lady on the roads."

"Yes? Yes? Go on, girl!" An angry red had risen to Virginia's cheeks. She flung discretion to the winds. She'd question Annette to the very limit, and get the story straight. "You mean that Mr. Armstrong has been meeting someone, secretly . . . unknown to me?"

Annette pursed up her lips, moving her tongue as though some highly palatable morsel rested on it, and she must make the tit-bit last as long as possible.

"No harm in it, I dessay, but it don't look well for a newly-engaged young man, and him quoting poetry and all, and looking at the moon and then at her, as though he could eat her - -"

"Gracious goodness! You'll drive me mad, Annette! Who was the girl?" demanded Virginia, beside herself with rage and curiosity and rising suspicion. "You're not referring to that Page child who stole Mrs. Vansittart's money and diamonds on the night of the dinner here?"

A crafty look came into the maid's eyes.

"None of the servants think *she* stole the money. We have a different idea," she said meaningly. "Maybe a certain gentleman we won't give any name to —and it isn't Mr. Armstrong, either—could tell. But it does seem as though Mr. Armstrong has a fancy for her, and I thought you'd better know, madam." (Anxiety for Miss Virginia's peace of mind

was certainly not Annette's intention . . . but it sounded well!)

Virginia rose in a flurry, completed her toilette as rapidly as possible, and pretty soon might have been seen heading across the fields towards Green Gables.

"Quoting poetry to her in the moonlight, was he?" Her lips curled in an ugly fashion. "I'll soon put an end to that!"

Chapter XXXI — *'A Common Scold!'*

THE bees were humming drowsily among the blossom of the apple-orchard, and Prudence Page—an enchanting picture in her gingham frock of faded blue—was lying in a hammock slung between two trees when Virginia—hot with wrath—came at a brisk pace down the road and sighted what she called the 'little disturber.'

"Sly little cat! S'pose she thinks Peter'll come along and see her? *Posing*, that's what she is!"

Prudence, however, was doing nothing of the sort. She was struggling to read a book of Victor Hugo's in the original, with a view to improving her knowledge of the French tongue.

For——

Now that her mother was so much better, Prudence cherished hopes of 'getting a job' somewhere, and that for a threefold reason.

Firstly, to get out of the radius of Peter Armstrong's vision. It was torturing to run the risk of meeting him.

Secondly, work was the great panacea for all woes, and the one possible way of forgetfulness.

Thirdly, she did so want to make herself 'worthwhile.' Having known (and loved) a man like Peter Armstrong, wasn't it up to her to be all the better for it, instead of bitter and narrow and 'disappointed'?

Virginia looked over the hedge, and seeing the sweetness and beauty of the younger girl, could have killed her there and then.

A big blossom fell on Prudence's face. Its pink-and-cream was no clearer than the girl's complexion, which was entirely guiltless of rouge or creams or powder.

Prudence swept the fallen blossom off, and as she did so, her book fell to the ground, and she sat up, yawning a little.

Virginia passed on to the garden gate, and went through it to another, larger gate which led into the apple-orchard.

It wasn't till she was within a few yards of Prudence, coming up behind, that the latter turned round and perceived the new-comer.

"Good afternoon!" snapped Virginia, conscious that the peaceful setting of the place was no fit spot for the letting loose of her own terrific temper, but torn with jealous rage. "I've come on rather an unpleasant mission, so I won't beat about the bush."

Prudence eyed her with disarming composure. *Odd* how this unexpected attack should so misfire?

But was it unexpected? The child must have a guilty conscience.

"Well, what is it?" Prudence vouchsafed no further greeting. She did not even move from the hammock, but sat there—apparently entire mistress of herself—gazing at her heated assailant with a wide-eyed candour that was peculiarly disconcerting.

Virginia moved nearer. She touched the fallen book with the toe of her smart shoe, and, with a sneer, remarked:

"Reading French novels on the sly, eh? Sweet, innocent little country maid not quite so angelic as she makes the men believe she is? Or perhaps *they* could tell a tale . . . ?"

Not for a moment did Prudence take her candid eyes from off the speaker's face, as gravely she replied:

"I thought that everyone who had been to a good school knew that Victor Hugo's novels are classics. Or haven't you ever learned French?"

That was a 'facer.'

"Don't be impertinent!" Virginia bit her petulant under-lip, and dug her parasol viciously into a little clump of flowers, as though she'd like to murder everything that was lovely, and cool, and dignified, she being none of these three things at the moment.

Prudence did not answer. Instead, she slid out of the hammock, picked up the fallen book, and—as though Virginia weren't there at all—turned her back on her and set off for the house.

"Here! Listen! Wait a minute!" Virginia caught up with her.

Prudence turned, still with the expression of dignified gravity.

"What do you wish to say?"

The other swallowed for a moment, then blurted out:

"Don't dare to poach on my preserves! Keep your hands off Peter Armstrong!"

Prudence's gaze widened. Queer how this 'society' girl could be as common as any fish-wife!

"You think I'm trying to take him away from you?"

"Yes. Not that there's the least chance of your succeeding, for men in Peter's class would never think seriously of a—a farm-girl, a dairymaid——"

Prudence's outward tranquillity did not fail her.

"Then why come to me at all? Why not let the matter be?"

Another 'poser'! This impudent chit had all her wits about her! thought Virginia furiously.

"I come to you because I don't choose to have gossip circulating about the man I'm going to marry," she rapped out. "He's mine . . . in love with me . . ."

"That being so," said Prudence calmly, "he couldn't possibly be interested in *me*! So set your mind at rest."

Pride triumphed over pain. She was a 'thoroughbred.'

"What d'you mean?"

"You say you are engaged to him. You say that he's in love with you. That being the case, how can you think he's even interested in me, or what I do?"

Virginia snorted.

"Don't play the innocent babe! Don't dare deny you met him the other evening in the moonlight!"

Before Prudence could reply to that, she hurried on, angrily:

"Men in Peter's class only amuse themselves with girls like you. Look how Bert Traymore played with you, and then threw you over. Bert's been in love with me for years. He's proposed to me a hundred times. You tried to get him and you failed. And now you're trying to get the other."

"You are totally mistaken." Prudence held her young head high. "But—since you talk so frankly—let me tell you something. I only do it because the man you are going to marry is so superior to yourself, so immeasurably above you in every way, that I fear for his happiness. And so I ask you not to smash his ideals, but let him keep his illusions about you—let him have his blind happiness as long as may be possible."

The girl spoke with such earnest conviction that for a moment Virginia was almost cowed.

To have the shallowness, the innate selfishness of one's nature set forth with simple directness, is rather disconcerting, even to a bold, unscrupulous creature such as this woman was.

And then the latter found her tongue, giving a hollow, sarcastic laugh that sounded like a croak.

"Little angel of superiority! Who gave you the right to dictate to me?"

Prudence kept her clear, level gaze upon her.

"The right of a deep and honest admiration for the man you're going to marry."

She was brave enough to get the words out.

"Ha! Ha! That's a good one! So you do admit you're wild about him, just as I thought you were? He'll laugh when I go and tell him."

"He won't laugh," said Prudence with acute perception. "Because you won't lower yourself to explain to him the mission that brought you here."

Virginia tossed her head.

"If you flatter yourself that Peter would think me jealous of a girl who was under a cloud for—well, I don't like to call it *stealing*—but he knows about the diamonds and the money being found on you. . . ."

"Stop!" The younger girl's air was so commanding that Virginia again was overawed. Prudence opened a gate in the hedge. "I ask you to go at once, and never enter my home or grounds again. Go, quickly!"

And so Virginia departed, minus battle honours, and hot to the very ears. The Page girl had got the best of her, and come off with flying colours, while she—Virginia—with all her 'culture' and travel and social superiority, had lowered herself and lost her temper and mislaid her breeding.

'*Indicted as a common scold!*' When travelling in America, she had once read a funny court-case where a woman was fined for quarrelling. She felt now as humiliated as that woman must have felt!

Chapter XXXII *A Shocking Discovery*

PRUDENCE, meantime, oddly stimulated by the encounter with Virginia, and with a queer, new hope a-flutter in her heart (for it had been but too obvious that Peter's fiancée was *jealous* of her, and maybe there *was* some reason? Maybe Peter had meant that enchanted kiss in the hospital? . . . (went into the kitchen of Green Gables and baked some special little cakes for tea, and set out a dainty little meal in the sitting-room for her mother and herself, and talked gaily with her mother, and was so bright and happy-seeming that the latter's fears anent her daughter's peace of mind were set at rest.

"You're not fretting any longer over that miserable

business at the Towers, my dear," said Mrs. Page, looking yearningly at Prudence. "The real thief'll be found yet. Truth will out. And so you're right to stop worrying, and be your happy self again."

But through the remainder of the afternoon the girl's thoughts circled round that episode.

Gradually, she came to connect Bert Traymore's visit to the woods with the happening at Wyndham Towers. When the money and the diamonds were discovered in her sash—stunned as she had been at the time—she recollected now the sly, furtive look in Traymore's eyes.

There had been exactly that same look in his eyes when the sound of horses' hoofs had disturbed him when he was fumbling at the bottom of the elm-tree!

What was he doing there?

He had been digging in the ground with a small implement of some sort, and then patting the earth and leaves into position again.

Was he hiding something?

Wasn't it possible that, on the evening of the dinner-party at the Towers, he had contrived to slip the money and the valuable ear-rings into her sash, to divert suspicion from himself? When Mrs. Vansittart discovered her loss, it was Bert who first came to Prudence, asking her to go and see her hostess. Wasn't it feasible that, knowing discovery might light upon herself, he had slipped the things into her sash?

She would visit the little wood, find the tall elm-tree, dig down, and maybe unearth other stolen goods this man had confiscated!

Prudence—despite the painfulness of the situation—felt an anticipatory thrill of excitement.

She contrived to steal away from Green Gables towards eight o'clock, and reached the glade where the beech-leaves made a fairy green, following the course of a tiny stream that glided under delicate willows.

Behind the glade there was a wood of tall elms, and . . . yes . . . there, about fifty yards from where she stood, was the very tree round whose base Bert Traymore had been digging.

Glancing about to see she wasn't watched, Prudence hurried to the spot, and took a trowel from a little basket she was carrying.

She worked intently for at least twenty minutes, but found nothing there.

She was almost sure this was the tree, because —although there were other trees near by and round about it—this was an elm. The other elms were farther back.

No, nothing hidden in the ground. She went quite deep, too, all round the base where one could dig.

After that, she tried some other trees, but could find nothing.

Then dusk came.

Prudence was glad that she had brought a flash-light with her.

Sitting back on her heels, she rested before starting on the homeward route.

Dusk fell rapidly. It was nearly dark now in the wood, and she was about to rise, when suddenly she heard a sound quite close—moving steps, very cautious —and looked round.

A woman was walking, deliberately, to a certain tree. The woman wore a long, loose cloak, and a soft

hat, crushed down low to shade her face, and when she reached the tree, which was quite near Prudence, she stopped and lit a lantern, setting it carefully on the ground.

Then she began to dig, working swiftly.

Prudence felt her very spine grow creepy. Was the mystery to be solved now? Who was the stranger?

In the light of the lantern, she saw the woman strain to lift a wooden box out of the ground, then brush the damp mould off it, and the sodden leaves, and set it down beside her.

She watched her dig two other, smaller boxes up, and then stoop over them, and open them.

Prudence could see quite clearly in the lantern's light, while herself keeping well out of its radius. The woman had her back to her, but the movement of her hands was visible.

She was lifting something glittering from the box. A necklace of some sort . . . diamonds?

There were bracelets, also, that shone with a gleam of precious stones.

And a heavy silver bowl wrought in a most elaborate design.

How sinister this queer scene was!

Good gracious! The woman had lifted, from the larger case, a pair of heavy golden candlesticks. Prudence could see them gleaming brightly, and immediately recognized them as a cherished possession of Mrs. Vansittart's, which had been stolen from the drawing-room at Wyndham Towers about five weeks ago!

"Mrs. Vansittart's heart-broken over losing them. She suspected Sime, the under-gardener, who'd been

bringing flowers into the drawing-room, and was the last person there before the loss." Janet Mercer had told Prudence all about it. "Poor Sime was dismissed on some other pretext, though that was the real reason, only of course Mrs. Vansittart didn't have definite proof."

Prudence remembered that now.

And here, dug up in boxes that had been buried in a wood, were the valuable gold candlesticks!

This woman was the thief, then!

Was Traymore in league with her?

Or had he merely been doing a little detective work, on his own, and come to the wood that day to follow up a clue?

All of these thoughts darted through the watcher's mind as she crouched in the deep shade of her own particular tree, and stared across at the scene the lantern showed up clearly.

If the woman found her, would she attack her?

But Prudence didn't feel afraid. Instead, she felt a strange exhilaration, and a great hope that the cloud which had hung over her ever since the night she'd been accused of theft, might now roll away for ever.

Only, everything depended on her silence and her watchfulness!

The woman took the heavy golden candlesticks, and put them back into the box again, replacing the necklace and the bracelets.

She opened another of the boxes, and brought out a variety of silver plate—spoons and forks and little cruets—counting them over to see that all were there.

Then Prudence saw her undo a little package,

and the lantern's light fell on a quantity of rings and jewellery.

She hesitated over one. Was it a brooch ?

" Opals ! Ugh, that's unlucky ! " Prudence caught the murmur, as the woman suddenly swung round, and with all her force threw the brooch out into the darkness.

Whiz ! Bang ! It hit Prudence on the forehead, causing a sharp cut.

Involuntarily she gave a little cry of pain that reached the woman, who at once straightened, open box of jewels in one arm, and the lantern in the other.

" Who's there ? " The question came like a pistol-shot.

Prudence did not stir.

There was something terribly familiar about that voice !

But no ! it couldn't be ! This cloaked creature, skulking in the darkness, was a *thief*, while the owner of the voice . . .

And yet——! And yet——!

" Come out, whoever you are ! "

Those tones . . . so *like* !

And then the glow of the lantern was flashed full on Prudence Page, and in its beams she saw the face of Virginia Dale, fierce as a tigress, the eyes glittering with a light like madness as they glared into her own, the hands clutching desperately the jewels she had stolen !

In girls of Prudence's character, there is an indomitable ' something ' which will rise to meet emergencies, no matter how amazing the latter may be.

Now—as Virginia's eyes glared upon her in the

eerie lantern-light—that 'something' came to the surface in the younger woman, so that she didn't scream, or faint, or run away, or do any of the foolish, so-called 'feminine' things a heroine of romance is supposed to do, in the astounding circumstances.

She stood her ground.

"Come out, you spy!" hissed Virginia, holding the lantern up, so that its rays fell full on Prudence.

The latter stepped forward, her footfalls making a crackling sound in the undergrowth.

An owl hooted drearily at that moment, and for a fantastic second it flitted through Prudence's mind that Virginia—distorted with rage and with frustrated scheming—was a *witch*, there in the queer shadows of the wood, behind the lantern's fitful light! The digging implements were a broomstick, weren't they? Would she fly off, over the tree-tops, and join that hooting owl amid the outer darkness?

"How dare you spy on me?" hissed Virginia, her eyes narrowed to a pin-point, like a dangerous cobra that is going to strike. "How dare you sneak on my track, you—you woman?"

Prudence met the envenomed glare.

"I dare anything for the restoration of my own good name," she answered in a measured tone that gave no hint of fear. A great light was dawning on her spirit. The diamond ear-rings and the money found in her sash . . . Virginia had worn the gown before *she* did, that catastrophic night . . . Virginia had left the stolen goods there, perhaps through carelessness, perhaps through deliberate wish to blacken her rival's character and chances. . . . Bert Traymore had been innocent . . . no one but Virginia had been to blame.

"Your good name? Faugh!" Virginia burst into horrible laughter that had no slightest sound of mirth about it, only hysteria. "Who in the world cares what a—a common *nobody* like you does, or says?"

For answer, Prudence, in a low, resolute tone, replied:

"Calling me names won't mend this matter. I've seen what I have seen,"—she nodded into the darkness in the direction of the elm-tree—"and I ask you what you are doing, hiding Mrs. Vansittart's property—her lost property, for I recognized the gold candlesticks, and several other things in the boxes—out here in this place?"

Virginia gave a high, angry laugh that again had the hysterical note about it.

"A chit like you dares to call ME to account?"

"I do. I shan't move from here until you give an explanation."

"Ha! ha! You won't? We'll see about that." And Virginia took a furious step towards the speaker, arm upraised, and something gleaming ominously . . .

"I shouldn't advise you to use violence" went on the cool, unafraid voice of the younger girl, standing immobile on the spot. "If you injured me—if you even killed me, here where we stand—it would be the ruin of you, and you know it. Our footsteps are already all over the mould and moss, and there wouldn't be the slightest difficulty in the police tracking you."

Police?

Virginia, deeply as she loathed this clear-eyed girl, shivered at the hateful word.

"I ask you," persisted the quiet, resolute young voice, "I ask you to explain why you are deliberately

hiding Mrs. Vansittart's gold candlesticks and other property which I recognize? "

"You can ask till Doomsday," hissed Virginia, fury again getting the upper hand. "You can——"

The words died on her lips, for in Prudence's clear, resolute eyes she saw a something that frightened her —something strong as granite, pure with the uprightness of an unsoiled spirit, unafraid as the Christian martyrs were in face of danger.

"I insist upon an explanation." There was a relentless note in the young voice, and Virginia, cowardly at heart as are all bullies, recognized it.

"Look here, why make a fuss? What's it to you what I do?" Her tone was suddenly flat and colourless, with a dragging sound about it.

There was a silence in which both girls neither spoke nor moved. Then Virginia, sullenly:

"Oh, if you're going to insist . . . I don't see it's any of your business . . . this stuff was left me by an old aunt who died . . . it was sent me through the trustees, the lawyers. . . . I kept the boxes in my trunks up at the Towers . . . didn't want Mrs. Vansittart to know, because I owed her money . . . bridge debts . . . and for a gown or two . . . you understand? . . ." She gulped and hesitated.

"No, I don't," said Prudence, in the tone of a judge arraigning a prisoner at the bar. "Go on."

"I started out to pawn the things," stuttered Virginia, the words now tumbling over each other in her eagerness to be finished with the hateful interview. "I—I didn't want anyone to know—they all think me rich—I'm poor, really—wretchedly poor—and I didn't see why I should pay Mrs. Van back the money, when I work like blazes to be gay and—and well-

dressed—to entertain her dull guests—I mean, I'd pay her back later, but just now I wanted the money for something else, you see—so I started off with the boxes—and then I saw Bert Traymore coming, so I hid them in this wood, for he mustn't know——"

"Give me the lantern." Prudence took it brusquely from the stammering speaker, and walked forward to the elm-tree. Stooping down, she lifted one of the heavy gold candlesticks, holding it aloft. "You say an old aunt left you these?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Then," said Prudence coolly, tilting the candelabra backwards, "how do you account for *this*?"

She pointed to Mrs. Vansittart's name in full, engraved in small letters at the bottom of the candlestick.

"I—I don't know," blurted out the accused. "It—it's a coincidence, that's all."

Prudence—the lantern in one hand, and the heavy candelabra in the other—looked at the speaker as though she would read her very soul.

"You do know," she said quietly, her young face showing no emotion, not even scorn of this cringing woman who was lying to her. "You know as well as I do, that your story of an aunt leaving you these valuables is a trumped-up one. The contents of these boxes belong to Mrs. Vansittart, just as these candlesticks do. I've no doubt you did intend to pawn them, or to sell them, but you hadn't got the right."

Virginia made a queer, whimpering sound, as though begging for mercy. She was terrified of this new, strong Prudence; and how loathsome it was that such a 'contretemps' had happened, just when every-

thing was running smoothly, and life opening up new vistas even beyond all her scheming hopes. If Peter Armstrong got to hear of this! . . .

"I—I'll confess everything—if only you'll promise—not to tell!" She sank down on her knees at Prudence's feet, a despicable spectacle in the eerie lantern rays. "You—you wouldn't be so cruel—as to give me away?"—and she clung to Prudence's skirts, her face white under its make-up, the rouge standing out in startling contrast on her cheek-bones, giving the face a grotesque appearance.

Prudence hated the contact of that touch.

"Get up, please." She drew back a little, but Virginia remained as she was, her eyes wild with terror.

"Never, until you promise not to tell! It would ruin me! I—I swear I'll *shoot* myself, if you won't promise! And then my blood will be on *your* head, and you'll never know a good night's rest——" She waxed hysterical, her voice rising higher and higher.

"Hush! Hush!"

"I won't! I don't care what happens now, if Peter Armstrong is to know of this! Rather than he finds out, I'd kill myself——"

It flitted through Prudence's mind, grimly and ironically, that if this thieving creature were to shoot herself, it wouldn't be such a great loss to the world, after all.

"Oh, I dare say it would please you . . . you've always hated me. You tried to get Bert Traymore . . . and then you wanted Peter . . . and now you'd like to see me off the earth . . . and if you tell Peter, I vow I will——"

"Stop!" The younger girl's voice was like a

bucket of cold water on the rising hysteria. "Stop for a moment thinking only of yourself! Put yourself in *my* place, for an instant!"

Virginia groaned:

"I know you want Peter . . ."

"Listen!" Prudence shook her by the shoulder. "This is no time for hedging. We're speaking woman to woman, and you *shall* hear what I have to say. I want Peter's happiness, not my own . . . not yours . . . d'you hear?"

Virginia raised her face.

"Peter's happiness?" she repeated blankly, stupidly.

"Just that . . . and nothing else. The question is, if I tell him the truth about you, wouldn't the knowledge be for his greater happiness, his ultimate peace, even though it hurt him at the time?"

"He loves me," wailed Virginia, and baulked desire forced great tears to her eyes, which trickled over the made-up lashes, so that the mascara ran in murky rivulets down her ashen cheeks.

"Ah! does he?" Prudence's voice had the clear ring of a seeress. "If I were only sure of that! It's a love that hasn't brought him peace, I know. The last time he talked to me, he gave me the impression of a deeply unhappy man. If he does love you, Virginia Dale, he's learning, to his sorrow, that his idol has feet of clay."

"He—he *worships* me!" Virginia seized on the likeliest weapon to melt this strange, upright girl who could think of Peter's happiness and not her own. "If you keep this dark . . . I—I'll give back all the things . . . if you won't disillusion Peter . . . it would kill him, he's so honourable . . . he loves me,

heart and soul . . . he's said so, a million times . . . if only I can get out of this awful scrape . . ."

She had risen to her feet now, and was facing Prudence in the little wood. Overhead, the trees were sighing eerily, and the owl hooted again, as though it laughed at the frail promises of the wretched woman.

"You haven't admitted the whole truth yet," said Prudence, her eyes on the haggard features that at this elemental moment seemed to have no trace of beauty. "Tell me, it was you who slipped the diamond ear-rings and the notes into the sash of the frock I wore at Mrs. Vansittart's party?"

The other bowed her head, and murmured an assent.

"You didn't stop to think how wickedly cruel and unjust it was?"

Virginia mumbled:

"They were in the frock all the time. I'd forgotten to remove them. I didn't mean to throw the blame on you."

"Oh, yes, you did," went on the level, accusing young voice. If you'll take your memory back, you'll recollect that it was you who came and told me Mrs. Vansittart wanted me. It was you who laughed, who tried to shame me——"

"Forgive me!" Another burst of hysteria seemed imminent. "If Peter knew, it would kill him, and I—I love him so!"

"Ah! but *do* you?" Prudence looked into the made-up eyes as though she would read the soul beneath, if such a soul existed. "Does a woman like you know what real love means, I wonder? Is a woman like you capable of giving a man like Peter

Armstrong what his heart and spirit cry for? If I thought you couldn't, believe me I shouldn't spare you! His happiness comes first with me. I frankly tell you so."

"You love him?" said Virginia, light dawning on her.

"That," replied the other, "is a question which doesn't in the least concern you. But let me tell you this"—her great eyes resting on the woman before her—"you'll never know real happiness until you learn that true love is unselfish, long-suffering, and something infinitely greater, infinitely stronger than yourself!"

Chapter XXXIII *'What Fools Men Are!'*

WILL OGILVIE stood in the chintz-bedecked sitting-room that was Janet Mercer's haven after working hours.

He was a diffident young man, but to-day his diffidence was heightened by a little package he kept twisting in his hands.

Why didn't Janet come?

She was a 'sensible' creature, not given to 'prinking' before mirrors, and such feminine weakness!

But Janet was in love, and that upsets the sternest characters. At this moment, she was indeed before the looking-glass, subconsciously trying to induce some coquetry into her severe nurse's uniform.

She stared grimly at her unbeautiful, though honest countenance, with its small, twinkly, greenish eyes and the absurd pug nose that sat so comically in the wide expanse of her freckled face.

"What he can see in me, God knows!" she murmured, under her breath.

If only he would speak right out! If only there could be a 'definite' engagement!

Men were so strange.

Take Peter Armstrong! Janet at one time could have sworn the man was head over heels in love with Prudence Page.

But he had thrown away the gold for the dross, and definitely allowed that vain, shallow, deceitful Dale girl to enmesh him!

"What fools men are!" Janet's mood changed abruptly, and she stalked away from the mirror as though hating her own past weakness, and on into the sitting-room where Will was waiting.

"Hello there!" She favoured him with an ungracious nod. "Can't ask you to sit down, as I'm due at the Towers."

A dull flush rose to the young man's sallow cheeks. He had come here full of romance, and of tender thoughts. Why must Janet be so brusque? Why must their mutual moods so often jar?

"Don't let me detain you, then. Sorry if I've intruded!" He lifted his hat from a settee, preparatory to departure.

"Oh, I can give you a minute, I dare say." Janet saw the hurt pride on his face, but for the life of her she couldn't say the soothing, tactful word.

"It's nothing at all. I—I brought you a present. Was fool enough to think it might—interest you."

"What is it?" Her heart started to pound with a new, swift hope. Was it—oh, joy of joys!—oh, symbol!—was it a ring?

Apparently it was!

But, having dashed Will's romantic mood with proverbial cold water, the chances were he wouldn't now produce it.

"Don't let me keep you. I might have known you wouldn't have the time to spare for me."

The words were gruff, but Janet was no fool, and sensed the real pain underneath them.

She did the only possible thing.

"Oh, Will dear, I'm a crusty, prickly old maid, and those awkward, ungracious speeches just naturally trip off my tongue, but I don't a bit mean them. It's just my unfortunate manner. If you only knew it, I'm delighted to see you. Truly I am,"—and she put her two hands on his shoulders, and looked up at him with the dumb love of some faithful animal.

Will Ogilvie thrust the little package in her hand.

"Open it. It's sort of—pretty. You don't have to wear it if you don't want to."

A spark was burning in his dark eyes, just the same, as he watched Janet's deft fingers undo the wrappings, and bring to light a really beautiful red ruby ring.

"Oh, Will! For me?"

All the pent-up feelings of the unsought woman were concentrated in the rapture of the words.

A ring! For her! At last!

Oh, blessed symbol of emancipation!

Oh, crown of womanhood!

"For you. Here,"—he moved awkwardly, grabbing her right hand—"let me stick it on. It's the third finger, isn't it?"

"The—the left hand, Will. Unless"—her heart sank suddenly—"unless you just mean it for a present—between friends——"

"Friends be blowed!" was the inelegant though utterly satisfactory answer, as Will drew the circlet over the correct finger. "There now, you're tied up to the dragon good and proper!"

The radiance of unshed tears sprang to her eyes.

"Oh, Will, you mean it? You want me? Truly?"

He drew her towards him, gazing down with unwonted tenderness at the homely, honest face.

"I've never wanted any other woman. And I'm no boy, my dear. I'm thirty-three next month."

"And I am nearly thirty." Her head drooped against his waistcoat.

"I hate girls, anyhow. It's you I'm fond of, Janet. Here, give us a kiss."

A few minutes later, rearranging her nurse's bonnet, her face irradiated with love triumphant, she breathed:

"I'm late, Will. I must go. Walk to the bus with me."

"Of course." He strode along beside her, her arm in his, for all the world to see. "And I'll call for you at the big house, when you've finished with the little girl."

"That'll be fine."

They parted.

Later, at the Towers, Mrs. Vansittart came into the nursery, to talk to Janet.

"Do you think Lucia any better?" The child was sleeping, and the mother bent over the cot.

"Yes, quite a bit. The doctor thinks—with careful treatment—she'll outgrow her weakness."

The mother looked relieved.

"Lucky she's taken such a fancy to you. You're a wonder, nurse." She gave Janet a look of gratitude, and then she added:

"You look ten years younger to-night. What's happened?"

"This." Janet held out her left hand, blushing nearly as deeply as the ruby that sparkled thereon. "I've gone and got engaged——"

But, instead of congratulating her, Mrs. Vansittart was staring speechlessly at the ring on her third finger.

"Where did you get it from?" she gasped, moving nearer.

"From my young man, Will Ogilvie." Janet displayed it proudly. "A beauty, isn't it? So quaint! Did you ever see a lovelier setting?"

Mrs. Vansittart's reply was unexpected.

"Never! I ought to know! Because that's the very ring I lost six weeks ago, and hunted high and low for! I'd know it anywhere! It's *mine!*"

"*Yours?* Impossible! I tell you, Will's just given it to me!" And Janet stared from the ruby up at her employer, and then back again at the lovely jewel.

But Mrs. Vansittart held her ground.

"I'd wager a thousand pounds to a shilling, that's my missing ring! Where did your Will get hold of it?"

Janet drew back. Any aspersion on her beloved was worse than a direct aspersion on herself.

"Are you insinuating——?"

"Don't be foolish." Mrs. Vansittart patted her arm. "Be a sensible girl and let me see the ring. There's an inside marking that's so faint you can hardly see it, but I'll bet it s there. That will prove to whom the ring really belongs."

"You want me to take it off?" From haughtiness Janet's voice became almost a wail. "Don't you know that's frightfully unlucky?"

"Nonsense, girl." Mrs. Vansittart's voice was as cool and bracing as a breeze from off the sea. "Here, slip the thing off a minute, and let me have a look at it."

Janet, to clear her beloved Will, had to comply. She did so reluctantly.

Mrs. Vansittart took the circlet over to the window, and—raising her lorgnette—examined its inside closely, turning and twisting it about.

Then she gave an excited cry.

"The marking's there, right enough. Come here, Miss Mercer." She took a small magnifying glass from her pocket. "I'm so short-sighted that I usually carry this about with me. I'll look through it. Ah, yes! Quite distinct! Look!"

Janet peered through the glass, and did observe some tiny signs inside the circlet, very faint. One undeniably was the letter V.

"The ring was a gift from my late husband. He scratched his initials here. I remember he looked quite sentimental," rambled on the older woman. Then, returning to the mystery: "And you say your sweetheart gave you this to-day? But where did *he* get it from, I'd like to know?"

Janet bit her lip.

"You can ask him yourself. He's calling for me in a few minutes' time."

The other seemed embarrassed at the approaching interview.

"Kind of awkward, isn't it? As though I were taking him to task! Not, of course, that he has any-

thing to do with the mysterious disappearings that are going on!"

"How d'you mean?"

The other nodded sagely.

"Something queer about this house. A sort of 'jinx' on it. Things walk off by themselves."

"Nonsense!" Janet was eminently practical. "You mean there's thieving?"

"If you'd call it that! D'you know"—lowering her voice—"I never could believe the little Page girl tried to steal that money and the diamonds that were found in her sash!"

"Of course you couldn't," Janet flared, in quick defence of her friend. "She's as honest as the day. Some spiteful creature who 'had a down' on her, or who was afraid of being caught themselves, did it. I'll wager every penny I possess that Prudence didn't."

Ensued a pause. Janet kept turning the ring nervously in her fingers. What would Will say when he saw that she had taken it off?

Will was so touchy. Their love affair had had its stormy passages. Indeed, it seemed as though the squalls had considerably outnumbered the spells of sunshine.

And now—to-day of all days—trouble boded.

She knew Will. Quick-tempered, supersensitive, on the look-out for 'slights,' it was the irony of fate that the ring he'd given her, which should be the happy token of a happy future, was to be made the subject of an inquisition that was bound to be distasteful, if not actually leading to a quarrel.

Mrs. Vansittart slipped out of the nursery just as Will's shadow appeared at the open French windows.

"Ready, Janet?" His usually rather moody face

was smiling. "What d'you say we go to the pictures to-night? I hear there's a funny one about married life, and we'd best be forearmed!"

"Sh-h! Lucia's sleeping." Janet stepped out to the lawns, and laid a hand upon her lover's arm.

His quick glance rested on the bare fingers.

"Where's the ring?" The question came with the sharpness of a pistol-shot.

"I—there's something funny about it," stammered Janet, Will's sudden change of manner putting her at a disadvantage. "Where did you get it, Will?"

This wasn't what she'd meant to say, at all. It was badly worded, brusque.

"Oho!" He drew back. "So it isn't good enough for you? Is that it?"

"No. No. It's lovely. But tell me, where did you get it?"

For answer, he drew from his pocket a little satin-covered case bearing the name of the best jeweller in the vicinity.

"Isn't that guarantee enough?"

"You're positive you bought it there?" persisted Janet.

Will flushed darkly. He misunderstood the reason of those queries.

"She thinks I've been tight with my money—that the ring's cheap! She's like all women—valuing it only at its cost."

Aloud he said, sarcastically:

"Maybe you'd like to go back to the shop and change it? Or maybe the money would be more useful to you? Eh?"

"Don't be angry, Will." She bit her lips, to steady them. "I know it's abominable of me, questioning

you, but I must know if the ring really did come from Rogers Bros."—consulting the name upon the satin box.

"And if I won't tell you, then I suppose you'll tramp straight there and find out for yourself? Have —have women no decency at all?"

"You don't understand, dear——" She tried to touch him on the arm again, but he drew back, resentment on his face.

"I understand only too well. You value what I give you only by the grandeur of the shop it comes from. Well, I won't keep up my pitiful attempt at deception, since you've been too clever for me! The satin box from Rogers Bros. was my mother's—I liked it because it was so pretty, and she let me take it, and the ring looked fine in it—but the ring itself I bought for twelve pounds in a pawnshop—yes, a pawnshop!—you can laugh all you want to, for I'm finished with you, Janet!"

He snatched the ruby ring from her fingers, and hurled it with all his might and main far into the bushes!

Chapter XXXIV *The Explosion*

PETER ARMSTRONG worked incessantly in his laboratory.

It was the one love that remained to him in this disturbing, topsy-turvy universe.

Time and again he wanted to tell Virginia—gently, for he couldn't bear to hurt a woman—what a stupid blunder their engagement was!

But Virginia's facile emotions had been definitely

touched. Conceited as she was, she knew that Peter's heart had not yet melted towards her, and—like that type of woman—the 'out-of-reach' had wondrous charm for her.

"I am in love with him," she told Mrs. Vansittart and her friends. "He's the one man in the world for me. I'll never look at anybody else."

"Take care *he* doesn't!" Mrs. Vansittart had teased. "The old rules of the Game, as played by you, my dear, won't always work with an unknown quantity like Peter Armstrong. He's different."

"It's his very difference that attracts me," said Virginia, for once speaking the truth.

"Plus his indifference," supplemented a candid friend, *sotto voce*.

It was lucky that Virginia didn't hear, for the lady's temper was none too good, of late. The course of true love, with its various bumps *en route*, had jangled her nerves considerably.

And—slippery and unreliable herself—she couldn't quite credit the Page child with keeping her promise not to tell about the elm-tree episode!

She—Virginia—had taken the boxes away in her little car, dispatching some of the things to London, and burying the remainder at the bottom of a cupboard in her bedroom at the Towers. She had locked the cupboard carefully, and was trying to replace the stolen goods, cautiously, one by one, when no one was about.

It was a risky and a thankless job, but done it must be, for who knew at what day or hour the prying Page girl might march in to see if the promise had been carried out!

Meantime, Peter was distressingly inattentive.

"I told you I wasn't a lady's man. I'm sorry, Virginia, but the leopard cannot change his spots." He had laughed apologetically, though his heart was far from light.

"Perhaps the leopard would like to change his lady-love?" she had suggested, furious within, but trying to seem arch.

He had been unflatteringly silent, then. She had hit the nail too neatly on the head.

There was no word about a wedding day. But that was the bride's prerogative, wasn't it?

She broached Mrs. Vansittart on the subject of marriage settlements.

"Not having a mother of my own, I'm sure you'll do it for me?"

"Do what, Virginia?"

"Arrange with Peter about the money he must settle on me, dear. A heart-to-heart talk."

"Hand-to-pocket, you mean!" The older woman had laughed brusquely. "No. No. I'm not old enough or wise enough to be your mother. And I'm sure you'll strike a much better bargain yourself. I'm no good at haggling."

Virginia had been furious, but had to bottle up her wrath, as free board and lodging at Wyndham Towers 'wasn't to be sneezed at,' to use her own poetic phraseology. Besides, it was the only place she could visit in the neighbourhood, and it was near Peter.

She set off for Pear-Tree Cottage, looking very fetching in a lavender organdie gown.

Peter was, as usual, hard at work.

"You can't stay long. In a few minutes, I shall be doing rather a risky experiment," said he bluntly.

" I'm sure you don't want your hair and eyebrows singed away."

Virginia gave a startled squeal.

" You wouldn't be half as handsome with your hair burnt off. Oh, do be careful, Peter darling."

' Peter darling ' looked rather grim.

" I thought you were keen about money, Virginia. An inventor in this special line has got to take a heap of risks. As a matter of fact, my invention is practically complete, and only waiting to be patented, but to-day's work may lead to a vast improvement. See ? "

" Financially ? " Virginia was all agog. Money did talk. And what did Peter's hair and eyebrows matter, weighed against hard cash !

Peter nodded, a measuring flask in one hand, and a pipette in the other.

" Run along now."

Virginia lingered. Peter somehow made her feel rather small and ignorant.

" You never tell me anything. How do explosions happen, for instance ? " (She'd like to blow the Page chit sky-high, and quite a lot of other people, too !)

Peter, in a bored manner, and in a school-marm's voice, droned, for her benefit :

" Explosion is the violent expansion taking place as the result of a chemical action between substances existing in close admixture, and having a highly exothermic action on combination. It is started by the application of heat, or of concussion to the mixture. Accidental laboratory explosions are usually due to the formation of two substances in contact with one another, such substances combining exothermically

with such violence as to form rapid evolution of gases——"

"Stop! Stop!" Virginia put her two hands daintily to her ears. "I don't understand a word of it. I'm off. You'll dine at the Towers to-night, Peter?"

"Yes, if I've finished in time," said the young man absent-mindedly, his thoughts quite evidently not on the young woman before him.

She went away, chagrined, careering at top speed in her car through the country roads.

"What's that?" A dull, muffled roar, like a cannon going off, caused her to pull up sharply, jump out and examine her tyres. "They're all right, and yet I could have sworn one of them had burst!"

Climbing back into the seat, she decided that the noise had been a distant clap of thunder, for the day was sultry.

Little did she guess that at that moment her fiancé, Peter Armstrong, was lying, an inert and helpless mass, upon the floor of his wrecked laboratory!

Prudence Page had not been far from Pear-Tree Cottage when the accident occurred. The noise of the explosion startled her, filling her with dreadful premonition.

"Peter! The laboratory!" She ran, with love's intuition, straight for the scene of the disaster, arriving there before anyone else had gained the spot.

The many windows of the laboratory were completely blown away. The garden and the field on which the shed abutted were strewn with broken glass and bits of bottles.

A queer, pungent smell came from within.

Without a moment's hesitation, Prudence tried to force the door open.

It had jammed.

She pushed and thrust, in vain.

Then, heedless of torn frock and a cut on her foot, she scrambled through a broken window, calling:

"Peter! Peter! Are you there?"

No answer.

She dropped from the window to the stone floor within, and gave a cry as she saw, amid the wreckage, Peter lying crumpled, face downward, one arm thrown forward, as though, amid disaster, he had tried to save himself.

"Peter!" Prudence rushed to him, and—kneeling down—she put her arms about his shoulders. "Peter! Speak to me! Oh, Peter!"

Ghastly silence.

"Peter!" The agonized cry rang through the wrecked shed.

Something warm and wet dripped on her hand, red-coloured. . . .

It was blood!

"Peter, dearest!" With a mighty effort she contrived to ease his head round, so that it fell against her shoulder. "Peter, wake up!"

Except for the deathly whiteness of his face, he looked as though he were asleep. The eyes were closed, the body limp.

Prudence thrust her hand inside his torn coat, against his heart. Was it still beating? Was he . . . was he . . . dead?

"Peter!"

Glass lay on the floor, and everywhere. Again that

warm trickle fell on Prudence's frock. There was a gash high above the ear, and the girl, without a moment's hesitation, tore a flounce of her gown off, and made a rough bandage for that bleeding head.

"Hi, there! What's happened?" The village constable rapped loudly on the door. "Open, I say!"

"Run for a doctor!" Prudence called.

The head of the village constable, accompanied by some neighbours, appeared at the wrecked windows.

"An explosion," said the girl quickly. "I'm afraid he's badly hurt."

One of the neighbours, who had a pony-trap outside, hurried for the doctor, while the others forced the door, and the big constable, with the help of another man, carried the unconscious Armstrong into the bedroom on the ground floor of Pear-Tree Cottage.

Someone ran for brandy, and old Nannie, wringing her hands, kept wailing:

"He is dead."

To Prudence, the whole thing was a terrible nightmare. It was only when Janet Mercer, cool and composed, arrived upon the scene, that she went home.

The doctor's diagnosis had been very guarded. Until he'd got a second opinion, one couldn't say the exact extent of the injuries. There were 'complications.' An operation might be necessary.

Yes, it was serious. Extremely so. One couldn't tell yet what the chances were. . . .

There were some bad signs. Heart action very feeble. Shock.

And danger of collapse, as always in these cases.

The other doctor had been telephoned for, from the local post office. He was on his way, by car. They

would telegraph to town for an eminent surgeon, if 'second opinion' advised it.

Prudence, her head full of the doctor's disjointed, gruff talk, walked with leaden feet towards her home. The news had spread, and her mother was at the garden gate, looking very anxious.

"Poor Mr. Armstrong!"

"He's still living," breathed Prudence, speaking as though she were in a sort of trance. "Janet Mercer is undertaking the case, and they've telegraphed for a night nurse, too. Lord Cumbermere was passing in his racing-car . . . he knows Peter . . . he says he'll get the best that's to be had, doctors, surgeons, nurses and all. Everything is being done."

At half-past nine that night, when the night nurse went on duty, Janet Mercer came to Green Gables for a breath of air.

"He's been partly conscious, partly delirious, but there's hope," she said to trembling Prudence. Then she added, anxiously:

"The worst trouble's with his eyes."

"What!"

"Yes. The explosion was a very bad one."

"Can—can he *see*?" asked Prudence, thunderstruck.

"We don't know yet. The doctor has them bandaged."

Next day, and the following, there was no further news. An eminent consultant from London had said that much depended on the nursing, and, in his turn, had brought a famous oculist.

"Can't say anything for a week, at least," the great one had announced.

When the week was up, he came again. Prudence,

drearily walking the roads, saw the big car arrive, and the famous oculist stride up the narrow path to Pear-Tree Cottage.

It seemed an interminable, heart-breaking time till he came out again. And he was looking very grave as he drove off.

Prudence's trembling limbs would scarcely carry her to the door.

"Oh, Janet, tell me what the oculist said? The eyes will get better, won't they? Don't tell me that Peter . . . I can't say the awful word . . . it would kill him. . . ."

Down Janet Mercer's homely face the tears were coursing. She took Prudence's hand in her own strong, capable one, gave it a pressure, then said brokenly:

"Be brave, my dear! He'll need all the bravery we can give him! When the oculist took off the bandages—— "

"Yes? Yes? Peter could see? . . ." breathed Prudence, clinging to Janet's hand.

"Peter will never see again. He's . . . *blind*!" said Janet brokenly.

Chapter XXXV *The Sentence*

"BLIND!"

Prudence repeated the fateful word as though she didn't in the least take in its meaning.

Peter Armstrong . . . blind! All the light of the sun and of this lovely world shut out for ever!

Those handsome, humorous, wise eyes that had smiled at her, and comforted her, and cheered her . . . never would they rest seeingly on her again!

"Peter!" She stammered out the much-loved name. What matter though he was another's? What matter though her love had no return? She would have given her own eyes for his happiness. . . .

"Come in. This way." Janet steered her into the tiny sitting-room of Pear-Tree Cottage. With a woman's sure intuition, she sensed that it wasn't only shock that Prudence suffered from, but something deeper.

"The child cares for him! If only he'd returned it, instead of setting his foolish heart on that callous Dale woman, what a rock of strength she'd have been to him just now!" thought the nurse, tears still on her cheeks.

Prudence stood at the window of the sitting-room, facing Janet.

"Does- does he know yet? Did- did the oculist tell him?"

Janet shook her head.

"There wasn't any need to tell. He knew. When the bandages were taken off, he was like a child groping in the darkness. The doctor tried to buoy him up with hope, but all Peter said was: 'I understand, doctor. Strength will come to me to face what lies before me. I pray that it will come.' And the doctor was so choked up with emotion, hardened though he is to painful interviews, that he couldn't say another word, but just gripped Peter's hand, hard, and got out of the room, somehow. As for me, when I got outside the door, I broke down, and not ashamed to admit it, for if ever there was a fine character in this world, it's Peter Armstrong!"

Prudence wiped her eyes.

"Is Virginia Dale here?"

"That creature? Huh! Is it likely?" The nurse shrugged expressive shoulders. Her lip curled. "Her excuse has been that she's so prostrated through the shock of Peter's accident, that she's been unable to leave her room at the Towers. But I met her yesterday, out walking in the evening with Traymore."

"Has - has Peter asked for her?"

"Just once. Mrs. Vansittart was calling, and he must have heard her voice out in the passage, for he inquired afterwards if Virginia had been with her. I said 'no.' He asked me to tell Virginia he would like to speak to her, but Virginia's message was that she was too ill and too upset to come."

"How could she?" Prudence breathed

Then they both started as a call came from the invalid's room, near by. "Nurse!"

"Excuse me." Janet hurried to her patient, who was lying, propped up on his pillows, just as she had left him. The bandages had been replaced, and in the light of the shaded room, only the clean-cut mouth and chin were visible, and the thick, wavy hair.

"Has someone come here, nurse?" The tones were low and perfectly steady.

"Only Prudence Page." Like a mother-bird fussing over her young, Janet drew the clothes more comfortably about him, fluffing up a pillow, adjusting a coverlet.

Peter started.

"Prudence Page? Has she been here before?"

"Oh, yes. Every day, and sometimes twice a day, to inquire. Those roses are from her." Janet moved a vase of blooms so that their perfume reached him. "And she isn't the only one who comes. I should think the entire village is at the door, most of the

time. You're a popular young man, Mr. Peter Armstrong!" She tried to make her voice sound jocular, but a half-sob caught in it, which Janet cleverly translated into a cough.

"Does she know the . . . verdict?"

"Gracious! how would I be telling her what talk takes place in a sick room? Besides, I've yet to learn that the doctor has given his verdict!" She had got control of herself by now, and her air was bracing. "Think of all the treatments you'll be having! Aren't the bandages on again, to give those stupid eyes of yours a further rest? What more d'you want?"

Peter's slow smile would have torn any heart in twain, so full it was of knowledge, of pathos, and of pain bravely borne.

"It's better to face the truth. I'll never see again. Lying here in the dark, trying to readjust my life, I—I've known it all along."

"Nonsense! You're morbid!" Janet clattered about the room, making a great noise, to hide her own emotion. "I'm going right up to the Towers and get your young lady, to come and cheer you——"

Under the bandages, his brows contracted. His lips twitched sensitively.

"Miss Dale won't come."

"She'll come, right enough," said Janet grimly. "Whenever Nurse Brown comes back from her walk, I'm going and fetch her. Now, is there anything you want?"

"If I might have a cigarette?"

Janet offered him some in a silver box, and allowed his fingers to grope until he found one. (It was kinder not to make him feel his helplessness too much.) Then she applied a match to the end of it, and when she saw

that he was smoking, she slipped quietly from the room.

"Go in and talk to him. Be bright. Be very, very hopeful," she adjured Prudence. "That Virginia Dale's conduct is a scandal, neglecting him the way she's done! Go in and show him there's a few real women left in the world——"

She thrust Prudence gently into the presence of the man who had just been condemned to eternal darkness.

* * * * *

"There's a young lady with the patient," Janet informed Nurse Brown, when the latter came in from her walk. "Don't go in until she comes out."

"S'pose there's no hope for his eyes?" inquired the newcomer laconically, throwing her cloak and bonnet on a chair, and setting about making herself a cup of tea. "S'pose the Great One said just what I thought he would?"

Janet nodded shortly. Brown wasn't really quite as callous as she sounded, but she riled Janet, just the same.

"How did young Armstrong take the blow?"

"Like the brave gentleman he is. We've got to do the best we can to cheer him, and don't you forget it." Janet departed for the Towers.

It was a sunny afternoon, but the woman's thoughts had little sunshine in them as she hurried on her mission. Reflections on her patient's ordeal and bleak future were mingled with Virginia Dale's defection, and the coolness existing between Janet herself and Will, her quondam sweetheart.

What a hopeless, painful puzzle life could be!

Better to live on the surface of things, better never to feel real emotion, than to suffer so!

Turning in at the west lodge gates, she spied Virginia's two-seater car ahead of her, and a man who looked like Traymore beside the fair driver.

"And she wasn't well enough to see her lover!" reflected Janet grimly, with sardonic lips.

When she reached the Towers, Mrs. Vansittart, Virginia and Traymore were enjoying a cup of tea in the library.

Janet stalked in.

"How's the patient, nurse?" cried the owner of the Towers, all sympathy, for indeed she was kind at heart, and had always liked poor Peter Armstrong.

"He's alive, if that's what you mean," said Janet ungraciously, "but I'm thinking it 'ud be better a hundred times if he were dead."

"Good gracious! What's happened?" Virginia bounded up from the deep 'chaise longue' where she was luxuriously reclining, in a clinging mauve tea-gown of some silken substance that freely displayed the lovely lines of her carefully cherished 'figure.' "What on earth's wrong?"

"Sit down. Don't let me disturb you." Janet took a chair and coldly regarded the entrancing vision. "Seat yourself."

Virginia shivered uncontrollably

"Don't tell me he's going to be permanently disfigured? I couldn't stand that! I couldn't——"

"Then you'll have to stand it, and a good lot more," said Janet brutally, "because, in addition to being 'permanently disfigured,' as you call it, he's going to be permanently blind!"

Virginia's tea-cup fell with a clatter to the carpet,

the hot liquid making a great stain down the front breadth of the lovely silken gown.

"Good God!" She rushed at Janet, caught her by the arm, and her pointed nails dug into the other's flesh. "You're lying, just to frighten me."

Janet shook her off as though she were some loathsome insect.

"You flatter yourself if you think I'd bother one way or the other about you, Miss Dale. I'm only here on behalf of my patient, who wants to see you, and has been asking for you. I understand you're his promised wife, and—strange as it may seem to you—the general idea would be that your place is at his bedside, if he wants you. And, curiously enough, he does seem to want you!"

Virginia did not appear to understand the meaning of the words.

"Blind? Disfigured?" she repeated stupidly. Then, almost with a gleam of hope: "You're sure he isn't going to die?"

"Sorry if I'm disappointing you, but there's little chance of that." Then, relaxing for a moment, and turning to Mrs. Vansittart, who was leaning forward eagerly in her chair: "The specialists both said that it's only his magnificent constitution that has pulled him through."

Mrs. Vansittart rose, and with a determined air addressed Virginia:

"Get your coat and wrap, and go right back to the cottage with Miss Mercer. The car'll take you there in no time. Hurry!"

Virginia drew back. She—a beauty-lover—to be compelled to look on man's disfigurement! She—to be forced into this disgusting situation!

"I'm frightfully sorry for poor Peter, but I simply can't go," she protested. "I'd faint, or take hysterics, and it would only upset him. Give him my—my"—she hesitated over the word 'love,' then substituted instead—"sympathy and—and best wishes. And I'll come whenever my nerves are fit enough."

Mrs. Vansittart caught her wrist with a grip of iron.

"You'll do as Miss Mercer asks you, right away, or you leave this house at once. I'm not going to have any scandal under my roof, young woman! Either you visit poor Armstrong—now—when he asks it, or you pack your trunks, and don't return again to Wyndham Towers!"

The ultimatum was delivered like a Roman empress, and it cowed Virginia.

"Oh, well, since you're all making such a fuss. . . ." She gave in, and went away with Janet on her highly distasteful mission.

"There goes a girl totally without a heart!" exclaimed Mrs. Vansittart to Bert Traymore, when the car had carried the beauteous one away. "I'm beginning to think that Peter Armstrong's tragedy has one alleviating feature since it certainly will free him of Virginia!"

"I quite agree with you," said Traymore unexpectedly.

She wheeled round on him.

"You mean, you'll marry her yourself?"

Young Traymore's answer wasn't what she thought that it would be, but it was forceful.

"I know too much about Virginia Dale ever to contemplate marriage with a woman of her type!"

Mrs. Vansittart gaped.

"And I thought that you were wild about her!"

Bert offered her his cigarette-case with a sardonic grin.

"Have one? No? Excuse me if I smoke?" And then he added:

"I'm friendly with Virginia just to find out certain things . . . never mind what! But as for romance—poof!"—he blew a ring of smoke into the air—"she's the last creature in the world I'd ever marry!"

Chapter XXXVI *The Perfect Love*

WHEN Janet Mercer thrust Prudence into the invalid's room, and softly closed the door behind her, Peter called out quickly:

"Who is there?"

All sorts of clever phrases, soothing little speeches had been improvised by Prudence on her many recent walks to and from Pear-Tree Cottage, to be brought forth at the psychological moment when Peter and she would meet again.

But alas! they all fled from her now, when she most needed them.

She could only murmur:

"It's just me—Prudence Page."

The invalid's lips twitched, but no sound came.

Was he angry with her? Did he resent her 'intrusion?'

"I—I—came to see how you were."

"That's very kind of you. Won't you sit down?"

Was the voice purposely stiff? Had she offended him?

Or was it the agonizing sensitiveness of anyone in his condition?

"I'll sit here, if I may." She drew a chair near the bed, stumbling a little as she did so, for her eyes were full of tears.

How ill he looked, under the confining bandages! That set line to the lips, too, betokened tension.

She mustn't stop to think that she was facing a man who had just received the devastating sentence of eternal darkness! She must say something, quickly.

. . .

"It's a perfectly lovely day, outside." The words slipped from her before she could stop them. Then she flushed with misery and shame to realize that this was nearly the worst thing she could have said, since the whole of nature's beauty must be for ever closed to Peter.

"I can feel the breeze," said the invalid quietly. And then he added: "D'you mind if I smoke?"

"Not in the very least." How calm he was! Prudence began to gain a little courage.

Running downwards from one of the bandages she could see a scar on his fine face. It was *incredible* to think that he would never see again!

But for a time she managed to keep up a banal conversation. She told him of the mild happenings of the village, of the farmers' gossip, of little incidents that might distract his mind.

She was startled when at last he said:

"It's going to be a little difficult to readjust myself to new ways of living. Life has changed tremendously for me in the last week or two, as no doubt you know."

She was silent, trembling. He went on, trying to sound cheerful, but with a queer catch in his voice at times:

"Odd how a man's dreams can be smashed! But

the only thing to do is pick oneself up out of the ruins, and do what's possible. I'm going to get hold of J. M. Barrie's essay on 'Courage' again. I remember reading it and appreciating it quite some time ago. It was, if I remember rightly, an address to the students at a Scottish university. I little thought how desperately I'd need it, myself, one day."

Prudence tried to speak, but instead she gave a stifled sob. Peter turned in bed, and held his hand out to her uncertainly, as though she were a distressed child like little Lucia, whom so many times he'd soothed and comforted.

"Don't worry about me——"

"I can't help it! I—oh, it breaks my heart!" Prudence hid her face against that groping hand, and hot tears poured on it, uncontrollable tears of love and sympathy and pain. That warm flood wiped the hopelessness from Peter's heart. . . .

"Prudence! Don't cry for me! I'll soon be up and about again! S-sh, sweetheart!" . . .

Unconscious of the endearing word, he leant over and, with his other hand, stroked the bowed head with its soft, childish curls.

"If only I could have given my—my eyes—my useless eyes—for you!" The overwhelming love and pity Prudence felt for him utterly submerged all reticence. "I'd have done it gladly, Peter! I'd do it now! There isn't *anything* I wouldn't do!" she sobbed.

He drew her nearer to him. The perfume of her hair was mingled with the scent of roses . . . she was a wild rose, sweet and fresh and natural . . . though nevermore could he refresh his soul with gazing at her unspoilt loveliness!

" Prudence ! " The pain of the whole world was in his voice again . . . pain and a hopeless longing. " I'm a broken crock . . . flotsam that the tide has flung up on a lonely shore . . . d'you understand ? "

" I—I—there isn't anybody in the world like you," she was breathing incoherently. " I—I don't mind—for myself, I mean, although it's terrible for you—I don't mind how much of a crock you are, or where the —the tide has flung you—if only it's somewhere near me—so that I can come to you——"

He drew her closer, holding on to her as a drowning man might hold.

" You care ? You care . . . a little bit . . . what happens to me ? "

Care ? What a weak, inadequate word to describe the tumult in her bosom ! Broken . . . blinded . . . smashed . . . she loved him with the whole force of her unsullied heart !

" Peter, if you died, I couldn't go on living ! I'd die too ! " she whispered brokenly.

Before there was time for him to answer, through the open window there came the sound of a woman's voice, raised high in angry argument.

" I won't see him ! I tell you I won't ! My nerves won't stand it ! You're a beast to try and force me ! "

The invalid and Prudence recognized the tones at once. . . . Virginia Dale !

There was a protest from another person, for Virginia's voice took on a higher, more hysterical note.

" Even if I did promise to marry him before the—the accident, no sane person would expect me to go through with it *now* ! What's that you say ? Duty ? Faugh ! Go and get a husband for yourself and stop preaching

to me! I tell you, I *won't* go near him! You can tell him so! I won't be tied for life to a blind man! I won't!"

On a shrill note of protest the voice died off, as though the speaker had either run away, or been dragged away.

Prudence held tight to Peter's hand, and her free left arm was round his shoulders, as though he were a little boy who must be shielded from every cruel wind that blew.

But, had she dared to see it at that moment, on Peter's face there was a strange relief, a new tranquillity it had not known for many days!

Chapter XXXVII *Virginia's Downfall*

VIRGINIA DALE was in a quandary.

'Nerves' (as she styled her selfish rage) having completely got the better of her, she had run away from her distasteful errand, only to realize that when the truth came out, as inevitably it would, thanks to Janet Mercer's acid tongue, that haven, Wyndham Towers, would be permanently closed to her.

"I ought to have gone to Peter and played the ministering angel!" She made an angry face as she hurried off in her car. "But, after all, it would only be postponing the inevitable, for I simply couldn't marry a blind, disfigured man! So why prolong the agony?"

She made a wide detour, to fill in the time supposedly allotted to the invalid.

"Janet Mercer—hateful cat!—will soon enough tell on me. But, I'll have one more evening at the

Towers, and in that time I'll pull things off with Bert."

Yes, that was her cue, the only possible solution.

Bert had been crazy over her for years. They'd marry by licence, right away, and then Bert could shoulder all her problems. There were lots of easy, albeit shady ways the pair of them could garner money, without really working for it.

She was lucky in finding Bert still in the library, alone.

"Well, how goes it?" He looked up carelessly from the novel in which his nose was buried. "Did you play the consoling angel to the stricken hero?"

'Jinny' flushed a little.

"I never was really keen about him, Bert. Don't twit me."

She came over and stood beside him. He made no effort to remove his slim legs from a neighbouring chair, where they were resting.

"I'm not twitting. It's a nasty corner for you, if you didn't ever care for the chap. It was his money you were after, wasn't it? Well, it's still O.K., I s'pose? He'll have a nice enough nest-egg in the bank, even though he's a bit smashed up."

"Don't, Bert." She dropped on to the edge of the deep arm-chair in which his person was luxuriously sunk, and her fingers—as though she would seek to hypnotize him—played with his sleek hair.

"Don't, Jinny." He jerked his head away. "You make me go all 'goosey' when you try those tricks." Then, attempting a pleasanter tone:

"Well, what's on your mind? Let's have it."

She hesitated, then she said, uncertainly:

"Mrs. Van is furious with me."

"Huh? Is that all?" Traymore grinned in a very knowing manner. "She'd be a heap wilder if she knew all I know!"

A flood of red ran to Virginia's cheeks, showing under the carefully applied rouge.

"What on earth do you mean? What are you trying to insinuate?"

He had raised himself for a moment in his chair, giving her a searching look. But now, with a light laugh, he sank back again.

"Oh, we've had quite enough melodramatics for one day. Forget it, and let's be cheery. When you go away from here, as go you must, if you've chucked Armstrong—Mrs. Van being a sort of champion of the sick, as 'twere—what's to become of you?"

She looked at him with goo-goo eyes.

"You and I were awfully fond of each other once. Don't you think we could do pretty good team-work together, Bert?"

He dropped his legs from the chair, and sat up straight. His glance was frankly astonished.

"For mercy's sake, you're not hinting that you want to marry me?"

She tossed her head.

"You've asked me more than once, if you'll remember!"

"But I couldn't even keep you in shoes, let alone in frocks and—and other things! For the love of Mike, what's come over you, girl?" He caught her arm.

She drooped against him.

"Oh, I'm tired of always knocking round other people's houses, outstaying one's welcome, and—and having to toady—and flatter people you despise!" It was one of the frankest confessions she had ever

made, and Bert was stunned into silence. "And you and I really needn't be hard-up. I could 'play' my wealthy friends in all sorts of ways."

He stared at her incredulously.

"But that's just what you want to escape from, you were saying!"

She hummed and hawed.

"It would be different if I had something . . . somebody . . . behind me," she said lamely, conscious that she wasn't setting the matter forth in its most attractive light, and yet sure of Bert's affection and allegiance. "We could go on the films together, or I could start a dressmaking establishment, or—we're pretty good at bridge and poker, Bert——"

The words died on her lips at a look on the young man's face. Had she tried him too far, and the worm had turned?

Or—had he met some other woman?

"What is it, Bert? Don't you care for me any more?" She edged nearer to him on the chair's edge.

He looked searchingly into her made-up eyes, and, when he spoke, his words were in the nature of a bomb-shell.

"At one time I was fond of you. But now I've no desire to marry a woman who is nothing but a common thief!" said he.

Virginia drew back.

"How dare you? How dare you libel me? I'll have the law on you for this! I'll——"

"You'll keep quiet, please, and not try any scenes with me!" Traymore caught her by the wrist with vice-like grip, so that she winced. "I know what I know, and it'll be better for you if you bear that in mind." He moved nearer, whispering in her ear:

"What about the silver and gold plate you stole from here, and buried in the woods?"

She blanched in terror.

"Don't deny it, you little fool. I watched you at work. Now, when I go and find the spot, I see that you've removed the goods. Where are they?"

Virginia's knees trembled. So some one other than Prudence Page knew of her guilt! A secret shared between three people in the world can never be a secret!

"Come on, don't be silly. I'm not planning to expose you. But cut this sentimental, marrying talk, give me a little hush-money, and maybe you and I can come to some arrangement profitable to both of us, and no harm done."

She shrank away from him.

But Traymore was persistent.

He had her in his power, and he intended to press that power to the limit. He had waited his time, and now the season was ripe for his nefarious purposes.

"Another matter I'm interested in- —" He lowered his voice for fear of eavesdroppers.

As she listened, Jinny's face changed from a thwarted sulkiness to a predatory greed that made her look extremely like a vulture.

"You don't say! As valuable as all that! And you think I could get hold of it?"

"Certainly." He looked at her through narrowed lids. Then, rising lazily to his feet: "It's a couple of hours till dinner. I think I'll kill time by calling round at Pear-Tree Cottage, and inquiring for the invalid."

They gave each other a long, slow look, pregnant with meaning, then Traymore left the room.

" Is Mrs. Vansittart lying down ? " Virginia inquired of the butler, who was passing through the hall.

" Yes, madam."

The girl went to her own room, carefully fastened the door behind her, and unlocking a suitcase that was hidden at the bottom of the wardrobe, drew out one of the heavy golden candlesticks she had appropriated some weeks back.

What to do with it ? That was a problem.

A shadow fell across the window. Kneeling on the floor with the ornament in her hands, she started backwards as she saw the butler pass outside.

She hurriedly slipped the candlestick out of sight.

" Was the fool spying on me ? "

But no ! That was too stupid. Simpson was an excellent servant, and had no mind above his station. He had only been in Mrs. Vansittart's service in the last two weeks, but had given every satisfaction.

How quiet the house lay ! Wouldn't this be a fortuitous time to slip the missing candlesticks back into their place ?

But what end would that serve since she—Virginia—was going away ?

The candlesticks were worth a heap of money. What purpose to relinquish them ?

She'd need all the money she could lay her hands on, for all her best-laid schemes had 'gang agley,' and even Bert didn't seem to want her any more.

She flushed as she remembered how he had dared to call her a 'common thief.' Yet, immediately after, he was putting into her mind another daring 'coup.' Surely that went to prove that he appreciated her cunning, and could be won yet, matrimonially speaking ?

Meantime, the object of her thoughts was taking a peculiar way of 'calling to inquire for the invalid.' He was dodging round the boarded-up windows of Peter's erstwhile laboratory, feeling for an opening with his hands.

It was rather disconcerting to suddenly come face to face with Prudence Page.

Had she seen him try the boardings?

"What are you doing here?" The girl faced him unsmilingly.

He attempted jocularity, though he felt very awkward.

"Just what *you're* doing, lady fair. I've come to inquire how the poor chap's getting along." He held out his hand in greeting, but Prudence made no move to take it.

"If you come round to the front-door, Miss Mercer, who is his nurse, will give you the latest report about him." Prudence led the way, and then betook herself off in the direction of her own home.

Janet Mercer regarded Traymore suspiciously.

"You got all the news of my patient a little less than an hour ago. I suppose you've come here to bring the apologies of your friend, Miss Dale?"

Oh no, he hadn't. He'd just come to make a friendly call, being almightily sorry for poor Armstrong. Was there anything he could do?

He disliked this competent, brusque woman, and was glad to sneak away at her dismissal.

Arriving back at Wyndham Towers, he found the front door open, but no sign of the well-trained butler anywhere. Simpson usually was visible . . . but now a queer air seemed to hang about the place . . . the

unnatural calm before a terrific storm. . . . What could be brewing?

Suddenly, from the direction of the library, he heard a woman scream. . . .

It was blood-curdling!

Followed a voice, wailing:

"Horrible! Horrible!"

Traymore's feet impelled him to the library, and with shaking hands he threw the door open.

An astounding picture met his eye. Mrs. Vansittart, the butler Simpson and three other men faced Virginia Dale, who—heavens!—was actually handcuffed to two big policemen!

Virginia! In handcuffs!

Traymore could barely believe the evidence of his own eyes!

"Save me, Bert! Oh, save me!" Like the heroine of a cheap melodrama, Virginia jerked forward towards him, but the handcuffs held her back.

"Take them off! They aren't necessary!" sobbed out Mrs. Vansittart, who was weeping in a heart-broken fashion. Then, helplessly, to Traymore:

"To think that such a ghastly scene could take place in my house! I'll never, never get over this!"

"Calm yourself, madam. The law must take its course," said one of the men authoritatively; but he nodded to the constables to undo the manacles. "If the prisoner won't try to escape again, and won't struggle, we'll treat her properly."

Mrs. Vansittart mopped her eyes.

"Come in, and shut the door. The whole world 'll know about this, soon enough," she moaned to Traymore. "Oh, the disgrace will kill me! Oh, I know it will!"

The plain-clothes man said, briskly:

"You have nothing to reproach yourself with, madam, except for being too 'easy.'" He had a notebook with him, and turning to Virginia, observed:

"If the prisoner has anything further she wishes to say, go ahead; but I must caution her to be careful, as any statements she makes will be taken in evidence against her."

"I never took the things," cried Virginia, glaring round at everybody like a tigress.

The plain-clothes man looked grim.

"You will be given opportunity in court to prove the truth of what you say. Meantime, the evidence against you is in order. This lady here"—he indicated Mrs. Vansittart—"has employed one of my men in the house for a full two weeks, and it's principally on his evidence that you are being arrested."

Virginia made a clawing motion towards Simpson, the detective who had masqueraded as a butler, and who had seen her many times when she least suspected it.

In her trunks had been discovered stolen property sufficient to convict her over and over again!

Janet Mercer's sweetheart was standing beside the pawnbroker who had sold him Mrs. Vansittart's ruby ring. Virginia had stolen the ring, in the first instance, and sold it outright to the broker for a much-needed five pounds, little recking it would come home to roost again!

"Mr. Ogilvie gave it to his fiancée as an engagement ring," Mrs. Vansittart had explained to the plain-clothes man she had hired to investigate all the recent peculiar happenings at Wyndham Towers. "He bought it in a pawnshop at the neighbouring town, and

so it should be quite an easy matter to trace the thief."

Virginia would have been caught, in any case, for Simpson had many 'counts' against her. But her carelessness in not taking precautions anent the stolen ring had precipitated matters just a little.

"That's the young lady." The owner of the pawnshop had identified her at once. Virginia was a striking figure one wouldn't forget in a hurry.

Traymore would have fled from the hateful scene, if flight were possible. He was terrified lest Virginia—idiot that she had been!—would try to drag him down with her.

Indeed, she did do her worst, by blurting out that Traymore had known for some time about the thefts, and had only to-day demanded 'hush-money.'

"In that case," said the plain-clothes man to Traymore, "you may be cited as 'accessory after the fact.'"

Traymore had utterly denied the least knowledge of Virginia's guilt, and in this Mrs. Vansittart, who herself had been so hoodwinked, backed him up.

"None of us knew what a—a Judas—we were harbouring," vehemently she cried. "You can see it's as great a shock to Mr Traymore as it is to me!"

That observation stood Bert Traymore in good stead, although he was instructed that he must appear as witness in the prisoner's forthcoming trial.

Finally, Virginia—alternately breathing forth venom and hysteria—was led away by the police and officer commanding them, and taken by car to the neighbouring lock-up, there to spend a night in meditation on the plight that her own greed and wickedness had led her into.

Mrs. Vansittart retired to bed, 'completely prostrated,' to use her own phrase.

After a light evening meal (somehow he hadn't much appetite to-night) Bert Traymore came to a certain definite decision.

"No time like the present," he reflected, fortifying himself with a double whisky, neat. The blame of his forthcoming enterprise could easily be flung upon Virginia, who would doubtless be in prison by the time discovery was made—if ever it was made! "She's been arrested to-day, so if the worst came to the worst, that would cover up *my* tracks!"

So deciding, and with a flashlight in his pocket, plus one or two things necessary for his 'enterprise,' he set off through the darkness, stealthily.

Chapter XXXVIII *The Strength of Samson*

JUST about the time Bert Traymore had left Wyndham Towers, Prudence at Green Gables was summoned to the front-door by a double knock.

Her parents were both out, and she was a little startled to see Janet Mercer and Will Ogilvie upon the step.

"Nothing wrong with Peter?" she asked quickly, her heart leaping to her throat. Since that palpitating visit to the invalid, only a few hours back, life had opened up new vistas for the girl. All in a day, she had had the stunning tidings that Peter would be blind for life. Following on the heels of that, was his fiancée's cruel repudiation of the tie that bound her to the injured man. Even before then, she herself had realized, with a forcefulness that was torrential and that swept aside all barriers, that she—Prudence Page—loved Peter Armstrong with a love that any mere physical disability would only make the stauncher.

And then, after Virginia's cruel words, Peter and she had turned to each other just like steel to magnet, and time itself seemed to stand still, breathless, just to hear their passionate avowal of undying love.

Peter had clung to Prudence, as though never, never could he let her go again. He had confessed to her, in broken tones, that always, from the first, she, and she only, had filled his thoughts and hopes, and that he had only stood aside because he thought she cared for Traymore.

As for his entanglement with Virginia (although Prudence didn't like to probe too far, and Peter was too innately chivalrous to give even a woman of that type away) it was apparent that Virginia had played her cards so cleverly that for a period she had won the game.

But never had Peter loved her.

"This lets me out," he whispered, when Virginia's cruel words had died away, and the woman who had sworn she loved him had run off because she knew that he was blind! "This awful trouble is a—blessing in disguise——"

Prudence had held him in her arms and kissed his dark hair just above the bandages.

"What does anything matter, if we've got each other?" she had whispered, eyes aglow.

Now, as Janet Mercer and Will Ogilvie stood at the door, the fear that love begets seized her.

"What's happened to Peter?" she whispered with dry lips.

"Peter's fine," said Janet brusquely, stepping into the little hall of Green Gables for a moment. "But there have been great doings up at the Towers to-night. Virginia Dale's been arrested for thieving, and taken off to the police-station."

"*What?*"

"Oh yes, it's true. Will was present, and a fine time was had by all!" Janet smiled grimly, turning to her young man. Then she added:

"I've no time now to give you the details, and anyway, you'll read them in the papers pretty soon, when she's tried at the court. I'm on my way to the Towers, for Mrs. Vansittart, poor soul, is completely overcome, and has sent for me. She's upset Lucia, too, and the place is all at sixes and sevens. My other patient's fine, and Nurse Brown is there in charge, but he's got a fancy he wants you near, and even though it's latish I thought your mother would let you go along, and humour an invalid's fancy . . . only I'm thinking it's more than a fancy he's got for you!"—and Janet smiled in sympathy, for hadn't her own precious Will been restored to her to-night!

"Oh yes, I'll go," said Prudence quickly, catching her hat and coat from a peg. "I'll go at once."

"It's only for an hour, and Nurse Brown will be there, too." Janet was a little uncertain as to what this young girl's parents might say. "To tell you the truth, Brown isn't much of a nurse, and to-night she says she's bilious, or something, and wants to lie down. I'll feel better about leaving the patient, if you're at hand."

They left Prudence at Pear-Tree Cottage, and the pair went on up to the Towers.

"I'm glad you've come, dearie," said Nurse Brown, "for my head's that bad I can't keep up any longer. I'm going upstairs to my room, if you don't mind. If the patient wants me, come for me."

Prudence was left alone with the sick man.

He felt along the coverlet until he caught her hand.

"Queer how nervous and jumpy I am to-night," he said, with a shamed half-laugh. "I suppose I haven't quite got over the shock—you'd call it that, I think?—of the explosion. Also"— he lowered his voice a little—"I'm worried about something! It's the record of my experiments—the invention, you understand—I was going to take out patents for it, but there wasn't time before the accident occurred—my notebooks are all intact, thank God! They're in a secret drawer in the laboratory bureau, and the doctor says the bureau wasn't struck at all—so I just left the papers there——"

"Then they're quite safe," said Prudence reassuringly.

"No, no," he whispered. "I keep thinking I hear footsteps in the laboratory . . . someone moving . . . listen!"

Prudence listened in the eerie silence.

"You think someone has broken in, and is trying to steal your invention?"

S-st! Through the thick wall there came a stealthy sound.

"I have the key," said Prudence bravely. "It's probably only a cat, but I'll go along and have a look."

She took a candle with her, and—treading softly on the grass—went round to the laboratory door, which had been mended since the accident. Gently she turned the key in the lock, pushed the door silently open, and in the candle rays—oh, horrors!—she saw a man, with his back to her, crouching over some documents at Peter's desk! Just before a gust of wind blew out the candle, the door flapped, making a grating noise; the man wheeled sharply round, and Prudence saw two eyes glaring at her through a black mask that hid all the rest of his face.

She screamed, and with a sudden spring he came at her, through the darkness, hurling her backwards to the floor!

Prudence could scarcely remember afterwards what happened. There in the darkness of what had been Peter's laboratory, she fought like a little wild-cat with the masked intruder.

"Help! Help!" she shouted at the top of her voice. "Help! Quick!"

She hung on desperately to the thief, with a life-or-death determination that go he should not, till Peter's rightful property had been restored! Those papers at the desk he had been fumbling over—without a doubt they contained the whole, secret record of the sick man's experiments and unpatented invention.

This brute was deliberately robbing a blinded man—but she, Prudence, would sooner die than let him get away!

"Shut up, you fool!" The man had some sort of scarf that he was desperately trying to twist about her mouth and head. "I'll kill you, if you scream again!"

Prudence's courage did not fail her. Indeed, it seemed as though some superhuman strength were given her, in this hour of need.

She struggled for those papers, calling breathlessly the while, though her voice seemed to come from very far away.

The man contrived to get his two hands on her throat at last, and a roaring noise surged in her ears, just like a mighty torrent.

Subconsciously she had a queer realization that she had heard the brute's voice before. . . .

Peter's invention! The work of months and years! His high hopes smashed for ever! She couldn't—

couldn't—let this creature steal those papers—even if she died to save her lover's work!

Suddenly the ghastly grip relaxed, and at the same time a bright light was flashed into the room. Prudence's eyes were closed, but through her lids she was conscious of this brilliance, and then conscious of a crash that echoed through the place as someone literally hurled himself across the floor in the direction of the intruder, and——

She sat up painfully, dragging her eyes open, to perceive—oh! most astounding picture!—Peter Armstrong with the masked man in his grip!

From behind her came a woman's scream, shrill, strident:

"You'll kill yourself! Leave him go!"—and, to add to the mêlée—Nurse Brown tottered forward, helplessly.

But before another word was uttered, Peter had wrenched the mask from the intruder's face, revealing to the women's startled gaze the fury-twisted features of Bert Traymore!

"So it's you, is it?" Peter shouted, and lunged out straight at him. "You'll pay for this! You'll——"

The blow was dodged by Traymore, who ducked his head and made a wild dash for the open door, shooting through it at lightning speed.

The lamp, which Nurse Brown had set down as she entered the laboratory behind her amazing patient, still flooded the place with light, and the floor was strewn with 'loose leaves' from a notebook, and various other documents.

Prudence got up and ran to Peter, who was now swaying on his feet. She flung an arm about him, calling to the nurse:

"Quick! Help me!"

Nurse Brown pulled herself together, and darted forward just as the invalid slumped helplessly against the girl.

"He's fainted! How on earth he had the strength to get in here, God only knows!" mumbled the woman, helping Prudence to lay her patient on the floor. "There was no holding him back, I tell you. He had the power of Samson! But he'll never survive to-night's excitement, never in his condition!"

Prudence ran to shut and bolt the door, and as she did so, almost collided with a man upon the mat. Was it Traymore, back again to steal the papers? . . . back again to try and kill her? . . .

She gave a stifled cry, and then she saw that it was—heaven be praised!—Will Ogilvie!

"What's happened?" Will rushed past her and up to the recumbent figure on the floor. "Armstrong? . . . good God! Who brought him here?"

"He came himself," said Nurse Brown in a shaky voice. "Miss Page was attacked by a thief, and nothing would hold Mr. Armstrong back. He was out of his bed and at the front-door the moment he heard her calling. I tried to stop him, but he flung me back with the strength of Samson, I tell you. So I grabbed up the lamp and overtook him just as he got here——"

"Did the fellow hurt him?" Will Ogilvie knelt down on the stone floor while Prudence carried the lamp nearer. "A chap dashed past me across the fields just now, careering hell-for-leather——"

"It was Bert Traymore, from the Towers," said Prudence with dry lips.

Between them, they carried the sick man back to

his bed, and then Will Ogilvie got a neighbour to hurry for the local doctor.

Will came back quickly.

"I'm not going to leave you two women alone, for fear this scoundrel of a Traymore—or his pals, maybe—comes back and makes a second attempt," said he. "What was the rascal trying to steal? Queer, wasn't it, how Janet had a premonition that something was going to happen in her absence? . . . so she sent me back."

"Traymore was trying to get hold of Peter's invention. It wasn't patented, you know." Prudence gave a half-sob, gazing down at the unconscious face of the man she loved better than life itself.

"Then I'll run into the—what d'you call it?—laboratory, and collect those papers."

The girl was left alone for a moment, and in that instant came a sudden realization of a strange fact, a most astounding thought.

"When Peter tore the mask from Traymore's face, and shouted 'So it's you, is it?', that surely went to prove "—thought Prudence, all a-tremble with a palpitating hope—"that surely went to prove that Peter's sight has suddenly come back to him!"

Amazing thought, beautiful beyond the power of earthly expression! Peter . . . to see again! Peter . . . to be dragged up from the abysmal darkness into which he had been plunged these many, many days!

And, if the astounding happening were true, she—the girl who loved him better than life itself—had been the cause of the amazing miracle!

It was to save her from disaster that he had risen from a bed of sickness and blindness, and flung himself at her assailant. It was her desperate cry that he had answered, in the very nick of time.

"If only it is true!" thought Prudence, a pulse throbbing in her throat, and her two hands clasped together. "If only it is true!"

Miracles did happen, didn't they? And, if a great shock made one blind, then wasn't it possible that a second shock of another kind might make one see again?

She had read of things like that in the daily papers. There had been lots of cases of it in the war. Men who had been blown up by shell explosion and had lost their power of vision had later had their sight restored through some unexpected happening, such as a motor accident, or fire, or a concussion of some sort.

Had this same thing, then, occurred in Peter's case?

The doctor came and Will Ogilvie sat with Prudence in the little parlour of the cottage, while the medico and nurse attended to the patient.

"Don't you believe what that Brown woman says about this excitement and effort being the death of Armstrong!" volunteered Will bluntly. "Maybe it's just what was needed, to put him on his feet again!"

Prudence told him of the glad hope that was turning in her mind.

"He *recognized* Traymore. So he must have *seen* him. Isn't it wonderful?"

Will's rather sombre face lit up.

"Great! I've heard of such things before. If a great shock deprives you of your sight, sometimes by a great shock of some sort, it will be restored again.

Not always, of course," he added, afraid to bolster up her hopes too high, for the fall would be all the greater if such hopes did not materialize.

Then Will added, with a grin:

"I don't blame him for rushing to the scene. He had everything at stake, hadn't he? The girl he loved . . . and these papers which you say are the record of his new invention."

He produced Peter's loose-leaf notebooks, and a couple of torn documents of some sort.

"This is all I could find. I don't imagine the chap got away with anything at all. Even if he did, the thing would have to be complete before it would be of any use to him, I fancy."

Prudence and he examined the jottings underneath the lamp.

"I used to be keen on lab. work as a boy." Will peered at the papers. "These look to me as though they were more or less in order."

Prudence drew a deep breath of relief. And then she said:

"It seems incredible to think that Traymore would try to do such a shocking thing!"

Will's sardonic grin widened.

"Worse than stealing pennies out of a blind man's hat, eh? But he didn't reckon that the blind man would have the strength of Samson, did he? I'll bet our pretty gentleman got the shock of his life when the invalid hurled himself into the fray! And it seems *you* weren't behindhand, either, Miss Prudence. I've got to admit you were plucky. Till lately"—he flushed a little under his sallow skin—"till lately, I didn't think much of women, if you don't mind my saying so. But you and Janet have made me alter

my opinion a bit. I've got to hand it to you both—for nerve—and for sticking by a fellow!"

This gracefully worded tribute would have made Prudence laugh at any other time.

But her ears and heart were keyed to the doctor's footsteps coming from the patient's room.

"He's such a big, strong fellow," she said, once or twice, rather piteously to Will. "It would be like giving him the earth again, if he can see——"

"And if he can't? What then?" supplemented the other.

Prudence's face was like the countenance of some exquisite Madonna, as she answered, quickly:

"Then I want nothing better than to be allowed to look after him, and be a pair of eyes to him, all the rest of his life and mine!"

A lump rose in Ogilvie's throat, and at the same time a shamed feeling took him when he remembered his past jealousy of this man. How wonderful women were! How truly capable of self-sacrifice! Take this girl Prudence and her unselfish love! Take Janet and her forgiveness of himself!

Prudence sprang up and ran to the little hall as the doctor emerged from Peter's room.

"His eyes? His eyes?" she whispered.

The doctor patted her on the shoulder.

"The best news in the world, my dear! Young Armstrong's yearning for a sight of you, so go to him."

"You mean . . . he can *see*?" Prudence clutched him by the arm.

The old doctor nodded, cleared his throat a couple of times, and then said brusquely, to hide his own emotion:

"When a chap's got such a pretty girl as you, you didn't expect him to do without his eyesight, did you?"

Chapter XXXIX — *The Tale is Told*

MRS. VANSITTART sat in the great drawing-room of Wyndham Towers, with Janet Mercer opposite her, and little Lucia playing happily on a big bear-skin rug.

"They say," said Mrs. Vansittart, her white, much-beringed fingers moving leisurely among the tea-things, "they say that nothing ever happens in the country, and that country life is dull. But, after the past day or two, never again will I believe it!"

Janet gave a sympathetic smile.

The lady rambled on:—

"It would almost make a story, wouldn't it? Peter Armstrong's accident, and the cold-blooded way that creature, Virginia, flung him over, while the little Page girl stuck to him, through thick and thin. He always did care for her, you know." This was delivered with the air of having made a remarkable new discovery.

"He was well out of the Virginia business," said Janet grimly. "I always loathed that girl, and it's amazing to me how you didn't see through her sooner."

Mrs. Vansittart shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, I'm no judge of character. And I can get along with anyone who will amuse me, and amuse my guests. But what came out in the police-court about Virginia simply flabbergasted me!"

"Me, too," said Janet, sipping her tea, and keeping an eye on little Lucia, who was doing some extraordinary gymnastics on the rug.

The mother's eyes followed the trained nurse's.

"You've worked wonders for that child. Her back's heaps stronger. Look, she couldn't have done that head-over-heels a month ago. You're a marvel, Janet, and I don't intend to forget it on your wedding-day."

The other flushed with pride, but demurred about the intended gift.

"It's pleased me as much as it's pleased you. The doctors think that in a year or two, thanks to the massage and treatment, she'll quite outgrow any weakness of the back. But any masseuse would have done the same for her."

"Rubbish! It isn't anybody that Lucia would have allowed to touch her. The child's sensitive to 'atmosphere,' and she recognizes the mother-instinct in you."

Janet glowed. Despite the weird occurrences of late, her own particular cup of blessing was running over. Will loved her. They were reconciled, and were to be married some day in the future. She—plain-featured, blunt-tongued Janet Mercer—was going to have a home and husband of her own, and maybe . . . children!

"I'd like to give the little Page girl a splendid wedding-present, to make up for what she's suffered in the past. I hate myself for suspecting her about those ear-rings and the money. Of course, all the country-side knows now it was Virginia, but just the same, the memory must still be painful to Prudence. I've written, and apologized, and called."

Janet loved Prudence, and she answered, quickly:

"Oh, the child never did bear you any malice. She's got a remarkably sweet nature. D'you know, when the report of Virginia's police-court trial came out in the local paper, and I showed it to her, instead of being delighted at the public downfall of a woman who'd injured her, and insulted her many's the time, the child's eyes filled with tears, and her voice was quite shaky when she said how sorry she felt for her, and she wished there was something she could do."

"Then she needn't waste her pity," retorted Mrs. Vansittart, helping herself to another cup of tea, and sipping it daintily. "Virginia's got a hide like a rhinoceros, though she did make such a scene in court, fainting dead away, and all that sort of thing, to get on the judge's soft side. When the counsel for the Crown, or whatever you call the man, read aloud her past record, it was I who nearly fainted, to think I'd been 'had' so long, and in so many ways!"

The good lady stirred her tea so violently that some of it splashed over on the carpet.

"But you were awfully kind to her, even after she was arrested," sympathized Janet. "You withdrew the charges, and said you would forgive her, and let her have a new start in life. You even offered to pay her passage to Australia, where she says she's got a sister living."

"But the local tradespeople, and the woman whose pearl necklace she stole at the Cumbermeres' ball, weren't such simpletons," snapped Mrs. Vansittart. "They wouldn't let her off. It's true I wanted to drop the case, but it seems the police had been on the scent of Virginia's other thefts long before I got

the detective to come here as butler. That rather relieves my mind. Detestable as Virginia was, I wouldn't like to have been the direct cause of her arrest, you know."

Janet looked thoughtfully out of the window.

"I suppose she has a 'moral kink.'"

"Several of them, I should say. She wasn't content with stealing, but she plotted the downfall of others. Take, for instance, her little trick of slipping those diamonds and the stolen money into Prudence's sash, the night of the party here."

Janet looked dubious.

"She'd worn the dress before, and maybe left them in her sash, through sheer forgetfulness?"

"Nonsense! Miss Jinny wasn't that sort at all. She had her eye on Peter Armstrong, and wanted to remove Prudence from her path. And she did drive the girl to run away to London, if you'll remember."

"Yes." Janet nodded.

"And then," went on Mrs. Vansittart, warming to her story, "what does Jinny do but boldly go to Peter's cottage, quite late in the evening, and when the thunderstorm came on, stay there till all hours of the morning, and then browbeat the poor, chivalrous fellow into an engagement, making out that otherwise her reputation would be ruined! Her 'reputation'? Bah! What fools we've been!"

"She certainly has had a past," commented Janet.

Mrs. Vansittart continued:

"Her solicitor cut a sorry figure, trying to bring it in as 'kleptomania.' She'd lifted things from the local shops, for months. The manager of Blank's had caught her once, it seemed, but Virginia had got on his soft side, and he let her off. Bartholomew's, that

big jewellery place in Meriton, had conclusive evidence against her. It seemed that after one of Virginia's visits—in my car, if you please, and using my name freely to get credit everywhere!—an emerald bracelet worth £300 was missing. When the police came here, they found the bracelet in her trunk!"

"Gracious!" breathed Janet, to whom a sum like £300 was a fortune. "The nerve of her!"

"But she wasn't clever enough," went on the older woman. "To hide the stuff she'd stolen from here, in two boxes in the ground in a wood, was the crudest idea I ever heard of! Simpson the detective found it out. He never gave me a hint of it until the last minute, when the police were already on their way here," and Mrs. Vansittart gave a dainty shiver.

"The judge was quite lenient, in the circumstances," said Janet, thoughtfully. "He only sentenced her to a year, and if she'd been a man, she might have got five! She'd been 'bound over' twice before, and some time ago she'd done two terms of about six months and a year, each, hadn't she?"

"Yes. Lucky for Peter Armstrong that she threw him over before the cataclysm! She'll be wild now if she hears that his sight has been restored to him! And wilder still when she hears what that famous firm have offered him for his patent!"

There was a long pause, while little Lucia prattled to her dolls, unconscious of the vivid drama that was revolving in her elders' minds.

"Any news of Traymore?" queried Janet at last, brusquely.

"None. As he didn't get away with anything, so far as we know, the police probably will drop the

matter. But it was outrageous, that attempt of his to get hold of Armstrong's invention! I suppose, if Prudence hadn't stopped him, and then Armstrong himself rushed in, Traymore would have dashed off to some foreign country, patented the invention there, and made his fortune!"

"All's well that ends well," said Janet unoriginally, but very truly.

* * * * *

Some days before the previous conversation, a slim, roughly-dressed young man, hat crushed well down to shade his features, might have been seen hurrying furtively along the crowded Strand.

Once or twice, afraid he might be recognized, he turned down a side-street towards the Embankment.

But finally, by devious ways, he reached his destination, which was a cheap photographer's where 'passport photos' could be taken, developed and printed all in the one day.

It wasn't vanity that drove Bert Traymore to the shop. It was the urgent need for leaving England!

And those tiresome passport regulations must be catered to.

He had a chance to go abroad, but alas! the passage must be in the steerage!

Firstly, because Traymore hadn't got the money even for the second class.

And secondly, because he might escape unnoticed in the steerage mob, whereas—if the police had orders to watch the various embarkations—they would probably keep their eye upon the first and second classes, and any disguise he might adopt would be more noticeable among better-dressed passengers,

whereas he could amble aboard the steerage with a five-days' growth upon his face, a handkerchief knotted about his neck in lieu of a collar and a tie, and an old hat rammed upon his head.

He didn't look too savoury, at the moment, but the photographer took the pictures, and four hours later, Traymore had the necessary copies in his pocket.

He filled the forms in at the passport offices, attaching a couple of the photos, but was rather disconcerted to be told by an official that a letter of recommendation (known as a 'Declaration') would be required from a mayor, or a magistrate, or a justice of the peace!

These were all people Traymore most particularly wished to avoid!

He was relieved, however, when he learnt that a doctor's signature would serve, and hunted up a former pal at Bart's, who had fallen on evil days through drink, and looked on Traymore's 'disguise' and sudden flight from England rather in the nature of a joke than otherwise.

Thus Traymore's passport was obtained.

And in the steerage of an outbound vessel, off he sailed, forgetful of Virginia and of all ties that had ever bound him to this country. In the new land he headed for, who knows?, he might intrigue an heiress who for the rest of his life would support him in the comfort and position his looks and peculiar talents merited!

In any case, 'Fresh fields and pastures new" was Traymore's motto!

Chapter XL What Makes the World Go Round

SOME fifteen months after the events above related, on a certain autumn evening, if one had peeped through the unshaded windows of a charming home not more than two miles from Green Gables, one would have seen a picture of domestic happiness unrivalled anywhere.

A long-legged, good-looking young man, sunk deep in an easy-chair, a pipe between his teeth, and a book in his hand, was reading aloud at intervals to a charmingly pretty girl who—seated on a rug before a crackling wood-fire—was playing with a dark-haired baby who bore a striking resemblance to the young man in the chair, but whose eyes were curiously like her own.

"Little Peter's going to have a visitor," she cried, catching up the dark-haired baby, and kissing him rapturously. "Baby Prudence is coming to call on him!"

The young man in the chair laughed lazily, looking down at his pretty wife with adoring eyes.

"Match-making already, are you? Peter and Prudence? Is it to be our own romance all over again?" He leant forward, playfully pinching her ear.

"Big Peter, you're a bully! Even if I were match-making, isn't it perfectly right and proper for a mother to dispose of her own child's future?" And Mrs. Peter Armstrong's laugh—which fifteen months of marriage had in no wise dimmed—tinkled forth just like a freshet of delight.

Peter laughed in unison. Everything that his young wife said or did was a source of pleasure to him, and he adored Peter Junior just as much as she did, which is saying something!

"Curious how pretty your little namesake is, considering Janet's—er—homeliness. And Will Ogilvie hasn't much in the way of looks to hand to his daughter, either," he averred. Then he added, as if discovering a great truth:

"Little Prudence Ogilvie must have become pretty, the moment they called her after you. Well, I don't blame the child, having such a godmother!"

"You tease!" Prudence glanced up at the clock, which had been Janet's wedding-gift to her. "They'll be here any time now." And then she added, stroking her husband's knee with one hand, while she held her baby in the other arm: "You were a darling, to make Janet's marriage possible!"

Peter pretended to look startled.

"I? How? What do you mean?"

Prudence shook her head at him.

"Now, don't dare pretend that you didn't make over to Janet a life-interest of something per cent on your invention! She'd hardly saved anything in her six years of nursing, as you know—and Will still has to support his mother. So their marriage would have been 'indefinitely postponed' if you hadn't been so generous!"

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh! it was nothing. A mere trifle! Besides, why should you and I have a corner in happiness, eh, puss? Mrs. Ogilvie nursed me wonderfully during that dark chapter of my life, when I thought I'd never see again, or be able to win you—and I was glad to do a little thing like that for her."

"You're an angel, Peter!"

"Of course I am! That's why baby's such a cherub!" He gathered Prudence and little Peter

into his arms, and at that moment the maid flung open the drawing-room door, announcing:

"Mr. and Mrs. Ogilvie."

Prudence scrambled from her husband's lap to greet her guests, who had with them a cooing infant about two months younger than Peter Junior.

"Janet darling! How glad I am to see you! You, too, Will!"—and she led them forward into the radius of light before the fire.

It was a comelier, plumper Janet, with the yearning look gone from the eyes, and a sweet repose hovering about the lips.

"How well you're looking, Prudence! Had a good time abroad? I dropped in several times to see if that new-fangled nurse with all the certificates was treating baby Peter right! He looks splendid, but I'll bet you missed him!"

"Every minute," said Prudence quickly, "although Peter and I had a lovely time. We visited Biarritz, and then did a little motor-tour in Spain, and on the way back we shopped in Paris, and I bought this for you."

'This' was a Liberty scarf in every colour of the rainbow, which gleamed in iridescent tints as Prudence deftly adjusted it about her friend's shoulders.

Janet's green-grey eyes filled with sudden tears.

"You and Peter spoil me. I never can thank you enough——" She looked at Will, knowing that if it hadn't been for Peter's generosity, done so tactfully and simply that their pride couldn't possibly be hurt, she and Will might still be dragging on on the old, unsatisfactory basis known as a 'long engagement.'

"Rubbish!" Prudence set her little namesake on the rug beside Peter Junior, and the two babies laughed

and cooed at each other in a most delightful way. "Now tell me what you think of our new house, won't you? You don't think it's too big for us, do you? *I* think it's awfully homey."

"And I do, too," said Janet quickly. "Peter and you have lots of taste, and the architect's followed out your instructions to the letter."

Prudence lowered her voice, to whisper:

"I was longing to get home from the Continent, and back to my baby and my new home. So was Peter. We cut short our tour. Wasn't it silly?"

"No. Quite natural. And how lovely to be within two miles of your father and mother!"

"That's partly why we chose this site," explained Prudence, smiling. "We see them so often, and Peter loves the neighbourhood as much as I do. We'd both be lost in the city. We're country lovers."

"He's been wonderfully successful," said Janet, with not one qualm of jealousy as she flung an appreciative glance across the room at the man who was so much more brilliant than her Will. "He could really retire now, and live on the proceeds of that wonderful invention, couldn't he?"

"But he wouldn't. He believes that every one should work. He puts in eight hours a day, you know, and three times a week he goes to town." Prudence's tone was immensely proud and possessive. And then she whispered: "He's the dearest husband in the world, Janet."

Janet nodded, and presently produced a cutting from her pocket.

"Read that. It's Virginia Dale's wedding announcement. A former suitor has come forward, and she's going out with him to his farm in New Zealand. I

don't envy him, do you? I hear he's twenty years older than she is, and he's forgiven her past, and everything."

"I'm glad," said Prudence simply. "I've felt so sorry for her for a long time. You and I, Janet, have been so very, very lucky. I don't know what I've done to deserve such happiness!"

She crossed the room and touched her husband's shoulder. And in her eyes shone love—enduring love—that miracle which makes the world go round.

THE END

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London